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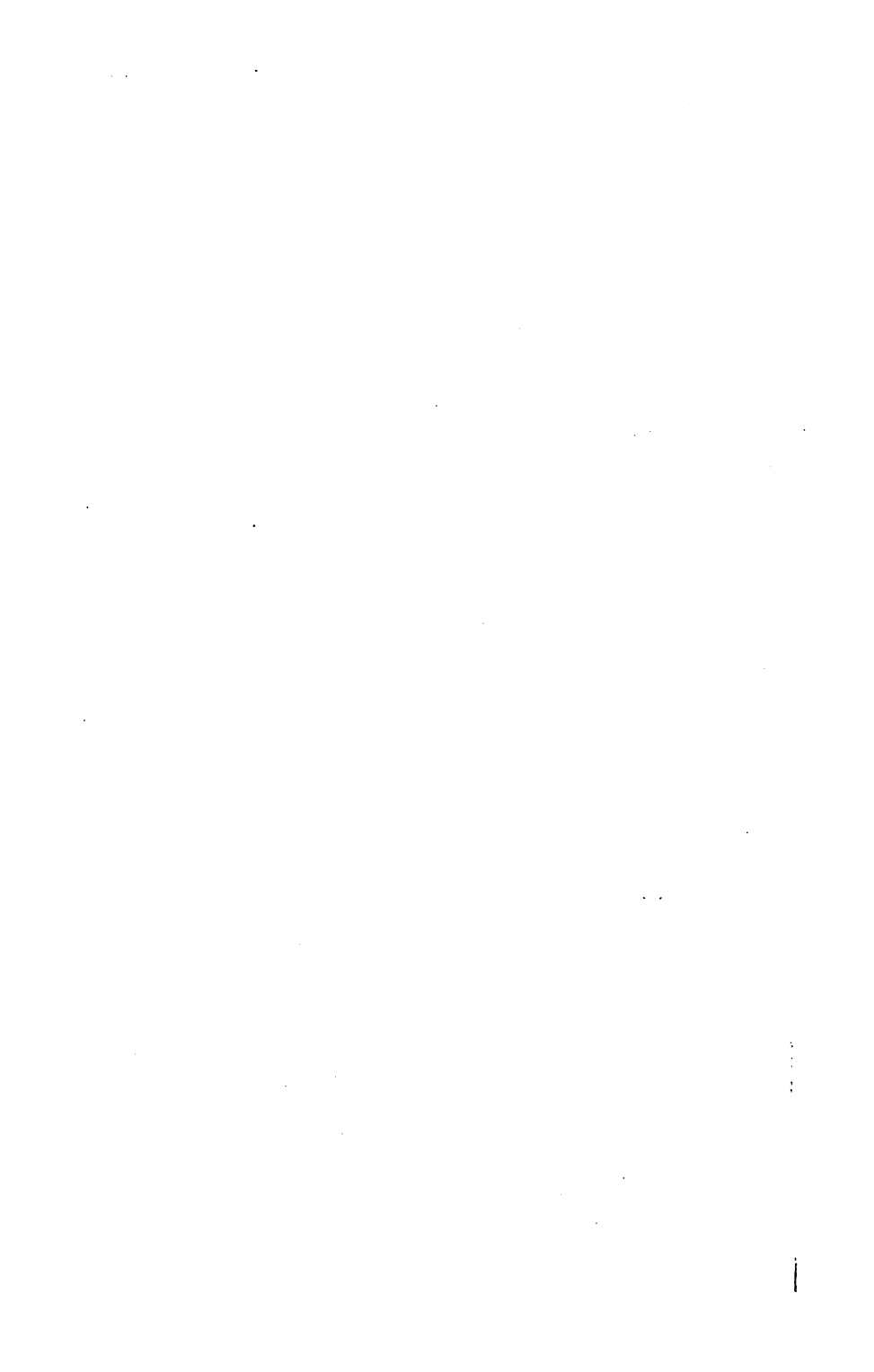




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Love Made Manifest

BY

GUY BOOTHBY

AUTHOR OF

"The Beautiful White Devil," "Dr. Nikola," "Pharos, the Egyptian, &c."

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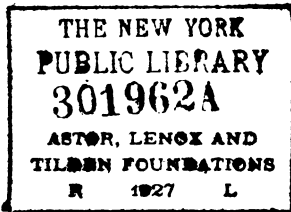
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ROY WOOD
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CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	I
I. FIFTEEN YEARS LATER	21
II. A PROSAIC LOVE AFFAIR	40
III. CLAUDE TURNS DRAMATIST	67
IV. WEDDING BELLS	77
V. A MARTYR OF SOCIETY	102
VI. LOIE	119
VII. BELGRAVE SQUARE	137
VIII. A DAY'S SHOPPING	154
IX. CLAUDE TAKES A HOLIDAY	171
X. LOIE PLAYS DETECTIVE	188
XI. CANNES	199
XII. A TEMPTATION AND A SACRIFICE	206
XIII. AN INTERVIEW WITH MARCIA	219
XIV. THE DUCHESS OF BELLAKER'S BALL	232
XV. AN UNEXPECTED DISCOVERY	238
XVI. A STORM AND A RESOLVE	252
XVII. THE ISLAND OF VAAMOA	268
XVIII. AN OFFER OF HELP	289
XIX. A CHAPTER OF ACCIDENTS	303
XX. FAREWELL TO LOIE	314
XXI. THE END	320

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Love Made Manifest



INTRODUCTION

It was the island of Upolu, in the Samoan group, and a breathless morning. The sun was almost at its meridian, the palms that lined the beach were as motionless as trees cut out of cardboard, and the lagoon dazzling as a dish of quicksilver set in sand. The only signs of life were the tumbling surf upon the outer reef, and a white boy lying upon his stomach, reading, on the edge of a grove of wild oranges and cocoanut palms, a hundred yards above high-water mark. There was not a human habitation of any sort to be seen in the whole landscape, though a native village existed round the corner of one headland, and the European Settlement of Apia was in the flood-tide of life and trade behind the other. That the youth was absorbed in his book admitted of no doubt, for he lay as still as a sleeping turtle, his eyes glued to the page, oblivious to everything around him, though all the time the sun was driving off the shade and climb-

ing higher and higher up his lightly clad back, and the surf was rumbling like thunder upon the reef on the other side of the lagoon.

"Yet some men say in many parts of England," he read, "that King Arthur is not dead, but is had by will of our Lord Jesu in another place. And men say that he shall come again and he shall win the Holy Cross. I will not say it shall be so, but rather I will say that here in this world he changed his life. But many men say that there is written upon his tomb this verse:

"*'Hic jacet Arthurus Rex Quondam Rex que Futurus.'*"

At this point he reverently closed his copy of Sir Thomas Mallory's immortal poem, and looked about him. It was a curious old book, that by some strange chance boasted a Balliol label inside its coverlid, and was coated and begrimed with the filth and dust of a career embracing fifteen chequered years in the Pacific. In the wild orange bushes on his right two green and yellow "jaos" were searching for honey, and at the same time chattering noisily; among the pink blossom of a group of fuafuas to the left, half a dozen Senga parrakeets, feathered in all colours of the rainbow, uttered their extraordinary cries, while through breaks in the foliage overhead glimpses of the blue sky could be obtained, showing a flock of white birds soaring up and up into what seemed the very eye of heaven itself. It was a day when it would appear impossible to work, and for this reason, perhaps, very few, save natives, were abroad, and even they, accustomed to the

warmth as they were, preferred to lie in the shade, to swap reminiscences, and to generally absorb the heat, rather than run the risk of injuring their constitutions by any violent exertion.

He was a strange boy, this ill-clad, ill-kept Claude de Carnyon—perhaps as extraordinary a specimen of the genus as could have been found in the whole length and breadth of the Pacific. What his right to his high-sounding patronymic may have been is more than I can say. It is sufficient, however, for the purposes of this history that his father was a dissolute old beachcomber, who had arrived in the Samoan group early in the seventies. Among other things he claimed to have once been an English University man, but he was now a complete wreck, and lived with a Samoan wife in a native village a mile or two outside Apia. Whatever other faults he may have had, neglect of his son's education could not have been included among them; for a more accomplished youth for his age—he was barely fifteen—could not have been found on the island, or, for the matter of that, in the whole Southern Hemisphere. Indeed, this teaching of his son was the brilliant old ruffian's one remaining amusement; and, perhaps as the result of some hereditary tendency, the lad had proved himself eager to make the most of it. In mathematics, it must be confessed, he was by no means reliable, but in Latin and Greek he could have easily held his own with many older men upon whose education thousands of pounds had been expended. The sonorous ancient poets were as familiar to him as the quaint Samoan

sagas his dusky stepmother was wont to croon before the hut door at sundown, while his acquaintance with the best English, German, Spanish, and Italian literature was, if a trifle fragmentary, at least three years in advance of that acquired by many students of even twice his age at our most cherished universities. In his way the old beachcomber was a genius; but, judging from the proofs he had so far given, his son bade fair to eclipse him.

In physique the boy was tall and well made, his hands and feet were small and neatly shaped. His head, from a phrenological, and indeed from any other point of view, was a magnificent one, and crowned with a wealth of curly hair that in the sunlight shone like molten gold. His features were a trifle disappointing, perhaps, but on the other hand they bore unmistakable promise of improvement with age. For the present they were refined and in some respects harmonious; the eyes were large and dreamy, the forehead broad, and the mouth somewhat small and sensitive, but not sufficiently so to be out of keeping with the remainder of the face. The weakest part was undoubtedly the chin, which was hardly square enough to indicate that amount of determination necessary for the formation of a really strong character. Taken altogether, however, it was the head and face of a scholar, and one who would live by his brains rather than by his hands.

As he put his book away from him and dropped his chin on to his folded arms, there was a stir in the long grass in front of him. Next moment a beautiful little

specimen of the Veba bird came steadily into view, searching for insects. Seeing the boy, and realising how close he was to danger, he dropped back into the grass and disappeared without a rustle in the direction he had come. For a moment or two all was quiet; then the lad espied, making his way through the dry herbage, a gorgeous black and gold beetle. His imagination, fired by the book he had been reading, and always on the lookout for the poetic, pictured him as a knight in black and gold armour, making his way through a dense forest in search of adventure. The path was a difficult one, and several times the course he steered led him beside great chasms. In some cases they were of sufficient depth to swallow him up half a dozen times over, and in not a few they measured at least eight inches from top to bottom. Leaving the track proper, he branched off to the left, and at this juncture an episode occurred that heightened the make-believe and brought the boy's chin down to the dust, that he might not lose one scrap of what was going forward. On one side of the knight's path was a high rock; to think of climbing it was out of the question; on the other was a yawning precipice, to fall into which would mean but one fate—certain death. The path was scarcely wide enough for one, for two it was impossible. Yet, as the knight passed along it, an enormous spider, of the tarantula breed, climbed down the cliff and blocked his passage. Evidently, thought Claude, this was the guardian of the pass. The knight considered for a moment. To go back would be to own himself a coward, to go forward would mean a

desperate battle and possible, if not probable, destruction. The foes on meeting had stopped, and now regarded each other for upwards of a minute. Then the black knight, without further thought, metaphorically couched his lance, stuck in his spurs, dashed forward, and before a prosaic Nineteenth Century could have said "Jack Robinson," had grappled with his antagonist. The demon of the pass was not behind him in desire, and for this reason they fought upon the narrow ledge with indomitable courage. The boy watched the combat with all his being, hardly daring to breathe when he saw the valiant knight overhanging the precipice, and feeling as if he must shout his joy aloud when the wicked ogre was compelled to give back a pace against the mountain-side. It was a struggle after his own heart, and he was still watching it with minute attention when he heard a rustling in the bushes on the bank above him, and, looking up, saw the face of a young girl smiling down at him.

"Loie," he cried, in surprise, "I didn't hear you coming." Then, as if by attending to her he might miss some detail of the battle going on before him, he said, "Come down here and look at this fight! It's worth seeing, I can tell you."

The girl parted the bushes, and did as she was told. She was a pretty little creature, dressed all in white, with a wealth of silken hair hanging down her back and a broad-brimmed straw hat stuck coquettishly on the back of her head.

"And what mischief are you up to now?" she inquired, as she threw herself down on the sand beside

the boy and brought her face to a corresponding level with his.

"No mischief," he answered quickly. "But look here. Do you see that knight in there? He's a brave fellow, I can tell you. I call him Sir Lancelot, because of his black and gold armour. When first I saw him he was riding his brave destrier through that forest in search of adventure, but had so far met with none. When, however, he reached this pass the Ogre of the Mountain dashed from his hiding-place and blocked his way. He would not yield, of course, and now they are fighting for the path."

Side by side, head pressed against head, the boy and girl lay and watched the combat. It was not, however, long before it was decided. The wicked ogre, employing some magic spell for which the other had no antidote, wrapped his arms about the valiant knight, and, putting forth an effort, hurled him from the path into the abyss.

"Farewell, brave Sir Lancelot," cried the boy, in perfect seriousness, as the beetle disappeared. "You fought a good fight, but the spells of Merlin have proved too strong for you."

Rolling over on to his back, he lay there for a moment staring up at the motionless palm fronds above his head, and finally sat up. His companion did the same, and then they looked at each other and laughed. The girl's laugh was something to hear and to remember; it was as unlike the ordinary expression of happiness or amusement as the boy's character was dissimilar to those of the youths in the township round

the corner. It seemed to contain the whole essence of raillery with the smallest modicum of mirth, and yet, while one was somewhat bound to participate in it, one could not help feeling that it was not altogether a sincere expression of the author's feelings.

The owner of this unusual attribute was, as I have said, a beautiful child; among other things she boasted a fine oval face, large expressive eyes, a tiny rosebud mouth, small teeth, even and white as pearls, and last, but not least, a complexion so perfect that it seemed impossible that it could have been subjected to the attacks of fourteen consecutive Pacific summers. She was the daughter and only child of a whisky-drinking coffee planter, of Irish extraction and good family, who lived on the other side of Apia, and she had been the boy's constant companion ever since he could remember. To-day he discovered that she was better dressed than he had ever seen her before. She wore, as I have said, a white dress, a large hat trimmed with lace, shoes, which were quite unusual additions to her attire, and stockings of superfine texture and newness. He could not understand it; she saw his bewilderment, and as she did she threw back her head and laughed again. That laugh decided him.

"You were always vain, Loie," he said, with the agreeable candour of youth, "and now that you've managed by some means or other to get some fine clothes you've come to show them off and try to make me jealous. But you can't; I'll have quite as good some day, if not better, for all my jacket's so threadbare now."

He scrutinised his ragged top garment with an exacting eye, became painfully conscious of its dirt, tried to remove a portion of it by brushing it with his fingers, and finally, seeing that it was quite impossible to better it, threw himself down again on the sand and steadfastly took stock of his companion. She laughed a little defiantly at his outburst of passion, checked herself as suddenly, and, changing her tone, said with a petulance that sat very prettily upon her—

“I didn’t think you would have wanted to quarrel with me on the day that I’m going away, Claude, or I shouldn’t have come. You may never see me again, you know.”

This overture did not have the effect she intended upon the boy. He only said scornfully—

“You’re always talking about going away, but you never go.”

“Well, we’re going this time, sure as gospel,” she said. “My uncle in Ireland—the one, you know, who drank O’Hara’s whisky and fought the ghost—is dead; and now my father’s rich, and what’s more, I’m a lady—Lady Loie Fanchester—and he’s the Earl of Kilgovan. I shall go to Court and kiss the Queen’s hand, and wear the most beautiful dresses in all the world, and never have a thing at all to do but ride in a carriage and enjoy myself from morning till night. There! what do you think of that?”

For a moment the boy was too dazed by the brilliant prospect conjured up by her words, and the vague possibility of there being some truth in what she said,

to reply. He only wriggled his shapely brown toes into the sand and stared at her.

"I don't believe a word of it," he said at last, but with a visible effort. "You imagine such a lot; and you always were such a little liar, Loie!"

She laughed and clapped her hands, not in the least abashed by his candid criticism.

"It's not a lie this time," she cried, her eyes sparkling with mischievous mirth. "It's what dad calls God's sober truth. The mail came in this morning and brought a letter for him. When he had read it he had to have three drinks before he could understand it. Then he sent me off to the store to buy whatever I liked; so I bought this dress, and we're going home to England this very afternoon. Though they wanted me to stay and pack my things, I ran away from them all to tell you."

By this time he had arrived at the conclusion that there was something in what she said. The tangible evidence offered by her gorgeous apparel, combined with her last speech, helped him to a decision. But clever as he undoubtedly was, he was not capable of grasping in an instant all that her going away would mean to him. Loie had been his sole friend and play-fellow, the sharer of his ambitions and dreams for as long as he could remember, and now to be told that she was going to leave him in order that she might take her place in a sphere to which it would seem impossible he could ever attain, struck him as not only a great injustice, but in the light of a positive personal injury.

"Dad says I shall be the prettiest woman in England, as well as one of the richest," said Loie, brushing her hair back from her face with a gesture more expressive than any words.

"You're conceited enough now; you'll be worse then," asserted the other, brutally.

"If you're going to be rude I shall go away at once, without saying goodbye at all. No, no! This is our last day, so don't be cross, Claude!"

"I'm not cross," the boy replied. "But I don't like your going away like this, Loie. Why need you go? I'm sure we're happy enough as we are. I've got heaps of new stories ready to tell you, and I'll write poetry about you as often as you want me to. You know you like that. You'll not find a bathing-place anywhere else to equal Rippling Falls, and it's so cold and shivery in England—not warm and comfortable like this."

He traced a half-circle in the sand with the toes of his right foot, and sniffed the smell of the dried earth and withered palm leaves that pervaded everything.

"You don't suppose I'm never coming back here, do you?" asked the girl indignantly. "Why, when I'm tired of England I shall travel about. Besides, I must go, you see, because my father's a Peer and has to sit in the House of Lords in his robes, with his coronet on his head, like the picture we have in the dining-room at home. I'm going to be a Maid of Honour, and stand on the Queen's right hand."

"I wouldn't give a fig for that," answered Claude. "I'm going to be a great author and painter some

day, and have everybody buying my books and my pictures. That's a good deal better than being a Peer or a Maid of Honour, I think."

"Then we'll be married in Westminster Abbey, like the princesses," said the girl, "and be happy ever after. Remember, Claude, you've promised to marry me."

"I've not forgotten," answered the boy sturdily. "When I'm a great author I'll be sure to come and claim you. And, Loie"—here his voice faltered a little as he realised for the first time how near the parting was—"mind you never forget me."

"I will remember," she whispered, and as she spoke the rich blood of youth mantled her cheek and made her face lovelier than ever. "Now I must be going home. They'll think I'm lost."

"I shall come down to the ship and say goodbye," said Claude.

"Mind you do, and I'll be on the lookout for you," she cried, and sprang to her feet like a young fawn. Then, with another "goodbye," she parted the bushes and went up the hillside singing, in a voice that was as sweet and true as any blackbird's, the chorus of a drinking song that she had picked up from her father—

"Gramachree ma cruiskeen
Slainte glad mavourneen,
Gramachree ma coolin bawn, bawn, bawn,
Oh, Gramachree ma coolin bawn."

After she had gone the boy sat for some time completely absorbed in thought. His world seemed sud-

denly to have fallen about his ears. Enthusiastically as he had spoken to her of their island home, he was not so bound up in it as to be without some ambition to make the acquaintance of the great world, and now that Loie was leaving it its beauties seemed to crumble before his eyes, and it became drearier than any desert. Over and over again kind-hearted captains of trading vessels had offered him trips among the islands, and once he had been tempted to venture even as far as San Francisco. But on each occasion, though he had pleaded hard, his father, who, in addition to being as poor as a church mouse and disreputable as an average travelling tinker, was as proud as Lucifer, had forbidden him to take advantage of such kindness.

Perhaps because he had never known a better, the home in the native hut was not as distasteful as it would otherwise have been. Nevertheless, in his own way, he had derived a notion that his father was looked down upon, that in spite of his brilliant education and boasted breeding, he was not on a par with the Consuls, the captains of the trading schooners, or the principal storekeepers. He was not by any manner of means an affectionate son, nor could he find in his heart any reverence for the gin-drinking, debased old ruffian who called himself his father, and who lay from morning to night on his mat at the door of the hut spouting Latin and Greek, and trying to induce any one who would listen to him to believe that once upon a time he really had been what he pretended, an Oxford don. If Loie were going away, why should he not go too? If he did his father would hardly miss

him. He would probably swear very fluently for some minutes, and, when that was safely through, would beat his Samoan wife, quote some lines from an obscene old Latin poet, more or less to the point, and then order more gin, and in absorbing that forget altogether his rebellious offspring.

The very thought of such an adventurous undertaking was almost too much for him. But if he did run away, the principle question to be decided was where to go. Then he remembered that old Captain Bowler, whose schooner, *The Morning Glory*, plied between Samoa and Sydney, was in harbour, and was due to sail that very day. If he had not already gone, and he could only persuade him to take him with him in any capacity, it did not matter what, then his flight would be arranged for him, and he would have started on the ambitious career he had marked out for himself. Once in Australia, he could either remain in one of the big cities or work his way to England, as he pleased. He resolved to see Captain Bowler without delay.

As he rose to his feet a young Samoan of good birth, hailing from his own village, passed along the beach and accosted him.

"Talofa!" cried the new-comer, halting alongside the grove.

"Talofa alii!" returned the boy politely. Then gathering from the expression on the other's face that something unpleasant was toward, he questioned him. As a result he learned that his father had been searching for him in all directions in order that he might send him into the township for gin; and, not being

able to discover him, he was promising him the finest thrashing he could imagine when he should come to hand. This seemed a good way out of the difficulty, and so, bidding his friend "farewell," he set off towards Apia on his father's errand. By the time he reached the grog shanty from which he was accustomed to obtain the spirit it was well past midday, and at four o'clock the mail boat, with Loie on board, was to sail.

The bar was crowded, but it was not long before he discovered the man he wanted, seated in a corner with a bottle of lager beer before him. He was a big, burly fellow, with a kindly face, blue eyes, and a beard that reached almost to his belt. He greeted the boy with a friendly nod, and, elephantine facetiousness being the order of the day, inquired how his new book was selling, and when he intended to sail with him.

"To-day, if you will take me," replied the youngster quickly. "I'll go aboard this afternoon."

The skipper laughed good-humouredly. It was a joke that lost nothing by a pretence of seriousness.

"That's the sort of talk," he said. "Mind you get your traps aboard early, for we sail at daybreak."

"I won't forget," said the boy; and having achieved his purpose, he bade his friend "goodbye," and with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, and a couple of bottles of gin under his arm, left the hotel and made his way home to the village, where his father's hut stood.

When he reached it he found his paternal parent

stretched out on a mat before the door, attired in an old suit of striped pyjamas, and very much the worse for such drink as he had been able to procure. He cursed his son fluently in three languages for a few minutes, and then, his attention being distracted by the sight of the bottles his offspring carried under his arm, forbore to abuse him further. The lad handed them to him with the old tin pannikin from which he usually imbibed his liquor, and then, with the first few sentences of an ode to Bacchus ringing in his ears, went round to the back to obtain some food from his Samoan stepmother. While eating it he sat on the trunk of a fallen tree and reviewed his position. The skipper of *The Morning Glory* had laughingly offered him a chance to leave the island; he had taken him at his word, and intended to stow himself away on board overnight. When they were safely out of sight of land he would make his appearance and claim the hospitality which had been offered to him. He felt compelled to adopt this course, for he knew very well if he were to go on board openly, the skipper, in spite of his invitation, would not think twice about putting him ashore again. From a contemplation of his own plans his thoughts passed to his father, whom he could hear regaling himself between drinks with thoughts of bygone glories and excesses. A shiver of disgust passed over the son, which was more an innate distaste for the vulgar than any personal dislike to his sire.

The mail boat that was to convey Loie from Samoa was advertised to sail at four o'clock, and at half-past three Claude was on the beach endeavouring to per-

suade some natives of his acquaintance to row him out to her.

If the morning had been hot, the afternoon was stifling. The surface of the lagoon gleamed like molten silver, and when he came alongside the great vessel her plates were so hot that he could hardly bear to touch them. However, he clambered aboard and found Loie, true to her promise, on the outlook for him, tricked out in all her finery. Her father was in the smoking-room on the hurricane deck, surrounded by the principal inhabitants of the beach, treating all present to champagne, and commenting enthusiastically on the change of fortune which had come to him.

Now that the actual moment of parting from his old playfellow had arrived, and he realised that it was no longer possible to prevent it, a desire to express his real feelings took possession of the boy. But an unaccustomed nervousness was upon him, and, try how he would to make it, his tongue would not utter the words that were in his heart. And every moment the time permitted him was growing shorter. Already the passengers were saying their last "goodbyes," the shore boats were pushing off from the ship's side, and the officers and crew were commencing their operations for getting the anchor aboard. In despair Claude turned to the girl beside him.

"Loie," he whispered, "you will not forget?"

"Forget what?" asked the girl, with unusual humility.

"That when I become a great author you are to marry me," replied the boy.

"No! I will not forget," answered Loie; "but, oh, Claude, don't be long!"

"I won't be long," the lad answered confidently. "I have made one step to-day towards it."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, that"—here he bent his head down and whispered in her ear—"that without you here I cannot live in Upolu. Loie, I am going to run away."

However serious the situation may have been, she only clapped her hands and laughed.

"Going to run away from Apia, Claude? Why, what a funny boy you are, to be sure! Where will you go to?"

This was not the sort of reception he had hoped his news would receive, and she saw that he was hurt by her ridicule. With quick womanly tact she turned to a side issue.

"If you are going to run away you must come to England, and then we may be friends again. Oh, that will be nice!"

"Friends! Loie," he said, with a gravity beyond his years. "We are going to be more than that. I am going to come home and make my name, and then we're going to be married and live happily ever afterwards."

As he spoke, he shuddered, though he could not tell why.

"I feel cold," she said, almost at the same moment, "and yet it's such a hot day."

At the same instant the whistle sounded for shore folk to leave the ship. Claude leant forward and

placed his arm round her waist. For the first time in his life his lips touched her cheek.

"Goodbye, Loie," he whispered; "darling Loie, goodbye."

"Goodbye," she faltered, with drooping eyes. Then, as if an afterthought had struck her, she added, "Remember, Claude, we're to be married, and you're never to love any one else in the whole world."

"I will never love any one but you, Loie, darling," he said, and clambering over the side dropped into the boat, which his native friends had kept waiting alongside for him. Half an hour later the steamer was a tiny speck on the horizon, and Loie had gone out into the great world into which he was soon to follow her.

By eight o'clock he had collected his greatest treasures and his meagre wardrobe, and was on board Captain Bowler's schooner, *The Morning Glory*, stowed away in a safe hiding-place. His presence on board was not discovered until the vessel had been nearly twelve hours at sea. Then he made his appearance on deck, and claimed the hospitality the skipper had so effusively offered him the previous day. A stormy five minutes was the result, but as it was quite impossible to put him ashore, and Captain Bowler was forced to remember that he had been the first to proffer the invitation, the best had to be made of a bad bargain, and the boy was accordingly carried on to Sydney.

When he left the vessel and found himself standing on Circular Quay, with the hum of the city in his ears

and not a friend in the place, the great ocean-going boats about him and only five shillings in his pocket, he began to realise that his acquaintance with the outside world had indeed commenced.

CHAPTER I

FIFTEEN YEARS LATER

Fifteen years had passed over his head since the day when Claude de Carnyon said "goodbye" to the islands of Samoa, and even in his happiest moments he could not with truth affirm that those fifteen years had in any way proved equal to the future which, as a boy, he had so sanguinely mapped out for himself. Clever as he undoubtedly was, success had so far refused to crown his efforts. It was certainly not for lack of industry. He had written book after book, and play after play, and had painted picture after picture, during his residence in Australia, but not a book had been published, a play produced, or a picture purchased, in all that time. The Colonies, ever ready to claim talent when it has been thoroughly recognised elsewhere, were almost stoical in their firmness not to encourage him in his endeavours, and as a natural consequence his life as an usher in a small up-country school had seemed the most dreary existence possible to any living child of man. Not once, but several times, he had felt tempted to give up the quest of fame and return to the island home from which he had come. But somehow on each occasion his faith in his own ultimate success had proved too strong, and he had

postponed it for a while. All the time he was saving every penny he could scrape together for the campaign. At last, one lovely day in May, he found himself standing on the wharf of the Shadwell Basin in the Port of London, looking over a pool of peasoup-coloured water, with a small bullock-hide trunk, full of manuscripts, on the stones beside him, thirty pounds in Bank of England notes safely stowed away in an inner pocket, wondering if it could be true that his desire was accomplished, and he was really in England after all.

Though he was but newly arrived, he told himself no time must be lost in getting to business. Within a couple of hours of his setting foot on shore, he had conveyed his one trunk up to Town and installed himself in a small room at the top of a large house in Great Coram Street, North, to which he had been directed from Sydney. An hour later he had purchased a pen and a bottle of ink, had unpacked his belongings, and posted his best manuscript to a famous publisher, whose very name was as sweet as music to his ears.

Now, if there is one part of London, north of Oxford Street, which to my mind is more depressing than another, it is that little bit of Town bounded on the top by St. Pancras Station, on the south by Russell Square, on the east by the Foundling Hospital, and on the west by Tottenham Court Road. And perhaps of all the dingy thoroughfares that here abound, the most depressing, dirtiest, and dingiest, is that dignified by the magnificent appellation of Great Coram Street. Here there is absolutely nothing to cheer the eye. The houses are old and gloomy, so much of their

appointments as can be seen from the pavement more than match them, while the inhabitants of the district invariably show signs of having fought the battle of life for indeterminate periods, and in the majority of instances would appear to have been badly worsted in the struggle.

To one favoured with a sharp eye, it is observable in this salubrious locality that the police are given to scrutinising passers-by more closely than would be considered consistent with their duty in the regions on the other side of Hyde Park; while the very butchers, bakers, milkmen, and other small tradesmen in the neighbourhood, would appear to have banded themselves together against the inhabitants, and to live in constant fear of moonlight flittings and of failure on the part of the said inhabitants to pay debts incurred for articles of human consumption. In Great Coram Street and its environs it may be confidently asserted that the art of enjoyment has long since been lost in the face of the more obtuse problem of actual living.

Though de Carnyon had all his life entertained a desire that was almost a craving to see and know for himself the life of the greatest city in the world, he did not waste his time in exploring it, but set himself to work upon a new book immediately he was installed. London would not run away, but his savings would, so he postponed amusement till after business hours. His slender means would not permit him the luxury of a sitting-room, and for this reason he used to take his glimpses of the Town during the time the tow-headed maid-of-all-work was making his bed every morning,

and when she was clearing away his supper in the evening. In this fashion he learnt to understand the difference between Burton Crescent, which is north, and Bedford Square, which is decidedly south. On the third day after his landing he walked to Oxford Street, where he stood on the pavement watching the endless stream of traffic, and dreaming dreams of all that his future was to do for him. Presently he saw that he had attracted the attention of a policeman across the way, and also that he was considered in the light of likely game by two precocious young thieves secreted in a neighbouring alley. When he found he had lost his purse he went home a sadder and a wiser man.

A fortnight later his first manuscript was returned to him with a polite note from the managing partner of the firm of publishers to whom he had sent it, informing him that unfortunately they did not consider that at the present moment they had a sufficiently advantageous opening for it. The two following posts brought him more refusals.

He looked from the letters to the neatly tied-up parcels upon his table, and thought if he had not sold two little water-colour sketches of South Sea life to a Jew in the Tottenham Court Road that morning, for a sovereign apiece, he would indeed have had good cause to feel unhappy. He did not guess that that selfsame dealer had resold his work, within an hour, for six times the price he had paid for it. If he had he would have been able to take them as an example, and have worked out for himself a pretty little problem in political economy, which would seem to argue that the orig-

inal manufacturer of an article must first be mulcted in order that subsequent vendors may achieve a profit.

However, though his manuscripts had been returned to him in a way he had been far from expecting, he was not at all cast down by the blow. He was barely thirty, he told himself, and even at that great age one can surely afford to look upon the future with a certain amount of hopefulness. Besides, he was confident of the real value of his own work, and by no means wanting in push and self-assertion. He knew that sooner or later his chance would come, and then he would make the most of it. Therefore he redirected the parcels, tied up and addressed another bundle of new MSS., and sallied forth to the post. When he had deposited them with the clerk he came out of the office in better spirits, and as the afternoon was fine and he wanted to think, set off, at his best pace, for a long walk. Ultimately he found himself in Hyde Park, leaning against the railings, regarding the movements of the fashionable world.

"Yes, my friend," he said to himself, as he watched a smart mail phaeton driven by a popular novelist go by, "some day you are going to drive in this park in exactly the self-same style; and perhaps another poor literary devil leaning upon these rails may see you and derive some sort of encouragement from the look of fatted contentment upon your face. Yes, it's got to come—the good time has certainly got to come, and when it does, by Jove, I'll make the most of it. It ought not to be far off now; it seems to me I've struggled long enough."

In the brightness of this summer evening, success somehow seemed closer and more assured than it had ever done before. In thus looking into the future he forgot the fact that his books, upon which he had counted so much, had been summarily rejected by the publishers; he forgot that his hard-earned and still harder-saved captial was reduced almost by a half; he only remembered that he was at last in England and in London, the hub of the Universe as some one has called it—at any rate the place where publishers, and the hanging committee of the Royal Academy live, move, and have their being. Moreover, when all was said and done he was not quite unknown, for had he not sold two pictures and received payment for them? Those pictures would have to hang somewhere, and then there would be at least one person who would know his name and have paid money for his work. The thought comforted him. But if he could have seen at that moment those self-same works of art being exhibited in a Royal Academician's drawing-room, and have heard the great man describing to an audience, consisting of a sculptor, an impressionist, a peer, and an M. P., how he picked them up for a mere song in the Tottenham Court Road, and expressing his firm conviction that whoever the poor devil might have been who painted them, he was an artist to his finger-tips, he would have felt even more certain of his future than ever. But Destiny, like Justice, must perforce go blindfold, and therefore cannot be expected to describe, either to warn or encourage, the nature of the land that lies ahead.

Leaving the Park, he made his way homeward, and as he went his thoughts reverted to Upolu, and then by a natural sequence to Loie, whom he had not seen since that hot afternoon, when he had kissed her on the deck of the mail boat in Apia harbour and had promised never to forget her. It was not the first time by a great many that he had thought of her. Since he had been in England he had made constant inquiries about her, and had also endeavoured to ascertain her whereabouts. All he could learn was that her father had quickly dissipated his inheritance and was now living abroad for economic and several other reasons.

He was still thinking of his old playfellow, when he reached the Tottenham Court Road and prepared to cross into Store Street. Just, however, as he was wondering what sort of a girl she had grown to be in her new life and surroundings, he became aware of a commotion further up the street. At first it was only a confused shouting, that swelled into a roar and then died down to a sudden silence. Next moment, however, a runaway horse, drawing a hansom cab, appeared in sight, making towards Oxford Street. The animal was flying down the street as fast as the vehicle to which he was attached would permit him, and the other traffic was drawing on either side that he might have uninterrupted play for his talents. Just as he reached Goodge Street an old man and a girl made their appearance from Windmill Street, and without noticing what was happening further up, began to cross the road. Every eye being turned to the advancing horse no one saw them, or thought to warn them,

till they were in the middle of the road. By this time the animal was not thirty yards distant. The girl turned her head and saw their danger, but it was too late. In another moment, unless he were checked, the terrified horse would be upon them. It looked as if no human power could save them. Women upon the pavement screamed. One or two men sprang forward, and afterwards stopped and stood still as if paralysed. Then, with a quickness that was more than half-instinctive, de Carnyon made up his mind, rushed into the road and threw himself upon the horse as it went by. The crowd stood breathless, expecting every moment to see him dashed to the ground and his life trampled out of him. But he made a good leap, and had caught the animal by the bridle. His weight was sufficient to check him for an instant, and then to divert his course altogether. Unable to support the strain upon his head, the animal swerved, missed the terrified couple in the road by an arm's length, crashed into a water-trough and fell exhausted upon the pavement. In falling one of his hoofs grazed the young man's knee, but otherwise he was none the worse for his adventure.

It had been a most plucky rescue, and the crowd, who had hitherto done nothing to assist, seeing that the danger was over, rushed up to bestow congratulations upon the hero. Claude rose to his feet, and finding that he was unhurt, dusted his clothes, and was looking for a chance of slipping away when he saw another small crowd gathered on the pavement a little further to his right. He strolled along to see the

reason of it, only to discover that it was occasioned by the girl, whose life he had saved, having fainted in the gutter. Seeing that he could do no good he withdrew as quickly as possible and, hastening his steps, lest he should be again recognised, made his way home.

Once out of sight of the crowd he slackened his pace; his knee had become rather painful, and there was no need for any hurry. As he reached his house a cab was drawing up at the door, and to his surprise, just as he passed up the steps, the selfsame old man and girl, whom he had rescued, alighted from it.

The girl seemed to have quite recovered, and as Claude opened the door she ran up the steps and recognised him.

"Surely, you are the gentleman who saved our lives?" she cried eagerly. "How can I thank you? Oh, if it hadn't been for you we should have been dead now."

"I was very fortunate in being able to stop the horse," he answered. "But you mustn't thank me too much, for after all it wasn't such a very difficult matter."

By this time he had realised that the girl was tall and singularly handsome. But for all that it was not an alluring style of beauty. Her face was cold and hard, and her mouth had lines round it that Claude's painting knowledge told him ought not to be in the face of a woman who, at the very most, could not be more than five-or-six-and-twenty. Her voice was soft, and well modulated, and she spoke with a fair show of refinement.

While she was talking to Claude, her father, who had been arguing the matter of distance with the cabman before paying him, put in an appearance, and seemed surprised to find his daughter in conversation with a stranger. He was an elderly man, perhaps sixty years of age, with a not unhandsome face, grey hair, and a long grey beard; he was dressed in a suit of solemn black that age was dyeing a peculiar shade of bottle-green. There was a decided flavour of the clerical about him.

"Father," said the girl, as the old gentleman reached the top step, "this is the young man" (Claude observed that she did not say gentleman) "who risked his life to stop the horse just now. I thought you would like to express your thanks to him."

The father paused for a moment and looked hard at the person referred to as if he were anxious to be quite certain, before he committed himself, that he was not being imposed upon.

"Dear me!" he said at last, pursing his lips up tight between each sentence. "And so you are that very courageous young man. Well, well, I'm sure you ought to be very gratified at the success that attended your efforts. Your assistance was most opportune, and, as you doubtless noticed, the crowd gave you quite an ovation."

"I'm glad to have assisted you," said Claude, feeling he could not tell why, both hurt and angry at the old man's speech. "I hope you will be none the worse for your fright to-morrow."

"I trust not, I trust not," answered the old man.

"God's merciful hand has been strong upon me this day. He will not suffer my feet to fall" (then, as if another thought had struck him, he added), "nor will he permit my body to become the prey of runaway hansom cabs."

When he had said this he passed into the hall, and ascended the staircase without another word. Claude and the girl stood in the entrance.

"How is it we chance to meet like this?" she asked. "Do you live in this house?"

"Yes," said Claude; "I have a room at the top. I pass up and down stairs several times a day; I wonder I have never seen you before. Have you been here long?"

"No, we only arrived yesterday. My father is the minister of the Last Day Resurrectionists, whose tabernacle is in Woodmerrow Street. We have three rooms on the second floor, and if you will come and see us of an evening I'm sure we will try to make you welcome."

"Thank you," said Claude, as he looked at the girl's pale, passionless face. "I will come with pleasure. And now may I ask your name?"

"My name is Hebstone; Marcia Hebstone. And yours?"

"Mine is Claude de Carnyon."

As he spoke a door opened on the floor above, and her father came to the banisters.

"Marcia," he cried, pettishly, "are you going to stand there talking all night, and let your father go wanting his tea?"

The girl turned to the young man before her, and, bowing slightly, bade him "good-night," and ran upstairs.

Claude followed more leisurely, thinking of the curious acquaintance he had just made. Reaching his room he threw himself down in a chair, and tried to recall the girl's face as he had seen it in the shadow of the doorway. He wanted, if possible, to understand it. That it was not a common face by any manner of means he was aware; there was something about it that made it different to any countenance he had ever seen before. In the first place he could see plainly that it was the face of a woman who knew the pangs of the keenest genteel poverty, and also of one who only looked upon the world from two standpoints—the religious and the commercial. It was the face of a woman as bigoted as woman could well be; one who would show no tolerance, and who would prefer going to the stake in martyrdom rather than to abate the smallest jot of her belief. All that was very plain. It was also evident that she had never known the power of love; whether that knowledge would ever come to her, and whether she would be capable of appreciating it when it did, was more than Claude could say.

He went across to a cupboard in the corner of the room, and took from it a panel upon which he had once painted a likeness of Loie as he remembered seeing her that last morning on the beach at Apia. Even if he could not write, it was evident he had the true gift of portrait painting, and this little picture was instinct with life and truth. The face upon the panel was as

beautiful as it would be possible to imagine a young girl's could be; the eyes were full of mirth, and the little rosebud mouth twitching with life and mischief. Placing it upon his mantelpiece, he sat down to his table and planned the opening chapter of his new book. When it was too dark to write any longer, he went to bed to dream, not of Loie, but of the girl in the room below—Marcia Hebstone, of the remembrance of whose pale, earnest face he could not rid his brain.

One night, about a week later, as he was on his way upstairs after a visit with a picture to his old friend the Jew dealer, the door at the end of the second landing opened, and Marcia Hebstone stood before him. As usual, she was dressed in black, with a plain white linen collar round her neck, made somewhat after the Puritan fashion of the seventeenth century. She was without her bonnet, and he could see that her hair, which was of a deep brown colour, was parted in the middle and brushed flat down to either ear without curl or ripple. The simplicity of this coiffure added to rather than detracted from the religious austerity of her appearance.

"I was under the impression that you promised to come in and see us some evening, Mr. de Carnyon," she said, as Claude approached her. "We have been expecting you this week past."

"I have been very busy," said Claude, "and have not had time for visiting. May I come in now?"

"We shall be very glad if you will," said Marcia simply, and stepping back she allowed him access to

the room. It was not a large apartment, nor was it at all well furnished: the carpet on the floor was old, stained, and in several places worn almost threadbare; the sofa by the door was minus one leg and a back, while its leather showed several gaping rents through which the horsehair was slowly but surely making its way out and about the room; a cheap mirror, the tarnished gilt edge of which was protected by still more faded yellow muslin, hung above the chimney-piece, and, where it was not cracked, reflected the three dust-covered geraniums in the window-box outside, and the two impossible oil-paintings of German origin that hung upon the opposite wall. On either side of the fireplace stood two armchairs whose disrepair almost equalled that of their kinsman the sofa before mentioned; in one of these sat the Reverend Josiah Hebstone himself, chief minister and guide of the sect known to some two hundred human beings out of London's five millions as the Last Day Resurrectionists. He had just peeled, and was now engaged in eating, an apple. When Claude entered he did not stop or offer to rise, but merely signed to him to the chair on the other side of the hearth, and continued his employment. When the last section had been disposed of, and it became evident that nothing remained save the core, he threw that into the empty grate with a sigh, rubbed his mouth and moustache vigorously with a red cotton handkerchief, and prepared to make himself agreeable. His method was scarcely more artistic than his manner of eating his apple, and it soon became evident that a life devoted to denunciatory preaching

had quite unfitted him for sober conversation. The Last Day Resurrectionists require, above all things, that their ministers shall be vigorous in their rhetoric, propounding their theories with clenched fists, and driving home their arguments with roars and bellowings that would do no discredit to the lungs of the Bulls of Bashan.

"I'm told that you're a writer of books and a painter of pictures, and that you live upstairs," he began severely, as if the three facts enumerated were criminal indictments, and he felt bound to treat them as such.

"Yes, that is quite true," Claude replied, with a smile. "I both write and paint, and I am reluctantly compelled to admit that I live upstairs. If I were permitted a choice, there are other houses I would rather dwell in, but since I am not able to pick and choose, why this one suits me well enough."

"Few of us would remain satisfied with our lots in life if we could change them," said the old gentleman dogmatically. "It is in that we see the frailty of this poor human existence. And now, one other question—What faith hold ye?"

Claude answered humbly that he held none, and, but for a look in Marcia's face would have gone on to say that up to the present he had never found occasion to require one. It was an unfortunate remark, for it served to give the minister the chance he wanted. Lifting himself a little in his chair and placing his hands together, finger-tip to finger-tip, he opened his mouth and began to reprove him. He saw the prospect of a convert, and at any cost he was not going to

let him slip without a struggle. He began his discourse in a voice low as the whisper of the evening breeze outside. For some moments he spoke jerkily and unconnectedly, not having found his proper footing. Then inspiration came to him, and his voice took a fuller note; words crowded on each other thick and fast, his face grew animated, his eyes glistened, and he was at once the true orator and leader. There was the ring of sincerity in his voice, and it was evident for the time being his heart meant every sentiment his mouth uttered. His words were of no consequence. What affected Claude was his manner of saying them—his delivery, the impassioned glance of his eyes, and the waving of his long, thin hands. He sat entranced. Never in his life before had he heard such preaching.

All the time he was talking Marcia sat beside the table in the centre of the room, her hands folded in her lap and her eyes fixed upon the golden eagle that, with outstretched wings, ornamented the summit of the looking-glass. Once Claude looked at her, and as he did so he saw that her face was transformed. Hitherto he had only thought of her as a woman, handsome, but cold; now, under the influence of her father's words, all that was changed, and she was radiantly beautiful.

While he was watching her the preacher's voice shifted from its former denunciatory style to a low note of tenderest entreaty. It lasted scarcely longer than a minute, and then with a startling peroration the discourse came to a conclusion.

Claude rose from his chair, his heart too full for

speech. Hitherto he had never thought of religion as a stimulus to life. In some vague way he had always regarded it as a peculiar sort of accessory to death; to be considered in the same category with sextons, shovels, hearses, tolling bells, and all the grim appurtenances of the undertaker's craft. He shook hands with father and daughter in a sort of bewilderment, thanked them for letting him come in, and then made his way upstairs with a tumult, for which he could in no way account, raging in his heart. He sat down in his chair by the window and looked out across the houses, to where he could just catch a glimpse of St. Paul's rising from the sea of roofs into the gathering gloom. Never before had the sight of that wonderful dome struck him in such a peculiar way. Some day, so he told himself, he would attend a service there and see if any of the aristocratic clergy officiating in that venerable pile possessed the power of stirring him as did the humble minister of the Last Day Resurrectionists downstairs.

His reverie was at length interrupted by a knock at the door. In answer to his call of "Come in," the dirty, bedraggled housemaid, who usually attended to his wants, entered with a letter. He took it, thanked her and when she had left the room turned the envelope over and looked at the address. The handwriting was stiff and quite unknown to him, the paper was good, and the flap was an embossed stamp, representing Minerva's classic head.

Wondering what it might mean, he broke the seal and removed the contents. The room was nearly

dark, and he had to hold the paper close to the window before he could decipher it. It proved to be from the firm of publishers to whom he had offered his latest MS., and ran as follows:—

“FLEET STREET, 6th July.

“DEAR SIR,—With respect to your book, ‘His Firm Conviction,’ the manuscript of which you were good enough to submit for our perusal, I am glad to be able to inform you that our reader has reported favourably upon it. Though feeling that it is not exactly up to what we consider our usual standard, we shall be pleased to give you fifty pounds for the copyright, and at the same time to offer to consider any further works from your pen that you may care to submit to us, at an increased remuneration. Soliciting the favour of an early reply, we beg to subscribe ourselves, your obedient servants,

“JACOBS, TRENT, AND TIDMARSH.

“Claude de Carnyon, Esq.”

Claude put the letter down with a sigh of relief, and also a peculiar feeling of bewilderment. The one great desire of his life was accomplished—a book of his own writing had been accepted by a London publisher. The offer was certainly not a generous one, but still it was an opening that might lead to greater things. He picked up the letter again, read it carefully, and then leant out of the window to watch the progress of the night and to think.

Almost instinctively his thoughts went back to the

Pacific. He saw himself a boy again, studying with his father, chasing Loie along the beach, bathing in the mountain pools, and dreaming always of the career that now seemed really to be opening to him. And all this time, he wondered, where was Loie, and what was she doing? Had she forgotten her old playfellow, and were they destined ever to meet again? He remembered her last words to him when he bade her goodbye on board the German mail boat: "Goodbye. Remember, we're to be married, and you're never to love any one else in the whole world."

With the remembrance of this speech in his mind he drew in his head, shut down the window and went to bed. His dreams were many, but figuring in them all was one person, who was not Loie. Marcia Hebstone was always before him, with her pale, determined face, just as he had seen her while her father was preaching that evening. It was the face of a woman who would either make or mar a man's career. His dream was a perfect nightmare. He saw himself successful, but in the hands of Marcia and her father. Together they held him tight and were drawing him down, down, to his ruin, while Loie tried hard to save him and lost her own soul in the attempt. He woke in a cold sweat of fear, and discovering that it was on the borderland of day resolved on no account to go to sleep again.

CHAPTER II

A PROSAIC LOVE AFFAIR

Two months later the book was published, was well advertised, and attracted a moderate amount of attention. The latter fact was partly accounted for by its extraordinary subject, but more so as being the work of a new man who had been brought up, so the publishers caused it to be artfully stated, entirely among savages, on a remote island in the Western Pacific. It was fairly well reviewed, sold to the extent of some five or six hundred copies, and then lapsed into that torpid state which in book-life precedes the condition of complete oblivion. Its production, however, did its author good in two ways: it showed him in which direction his power lay, and it opened to him the pages of the magazines. Offers from editors to consider his work began to dribble in; slowly at first, but more quickly as his contributions appeared in the more popular prints. It soon became evident that his tide had turned, and now it only remained for him to work hard and to make the most of it.

As soon as his position became really assured, and money began to flow in, he resolved upon a change in his manner of living. Accordingly he said "goodbye" to Great Coram Street, and transferred his belongings

to one of a nest of studios in Camden Town. Here he would be free to lead his own life and do just as he pleased. His furnishing was not a big item. A ten-pound note bought him all he required, including cooking and eating utensils, a camp-bedstead and mattress, two pairs of cheap blankets, a table, a chair, a wash-hand basin, and an easel. He was his own cook and housemaid, did his own marketing at a general store in the Camden Road, and with the exception of a charwoman who came in on Saturday afternoons to clean up, and an occasional model, had no woman near the premises. Day in, day out, he toiled like a galley-slave for the success that he had determined should be so big some day. It was neither a luxurious nor an æsthetic life, but he had the satisfaction of knowing that by dint of hard work it might be made so some day. The occupants of the other studios could not understand him at all. They respected his reserve for nearly a week, but when the first Sunday night came round and he still evinced no desire for their society, the bolder spirits resolved to show their appreciation of his standoffish behaviour by inviting themselves to supper and bringing their musical instruments with them. The latter took the shape of tin trumpets and bicycle bugles: both desirable in their proper spheres, but rather too demonstrative for a supper party.

To their surprise and disappointment they discovered that the door was open on arrival, so that their amiable intention of breaking it in was frustrated. They also found his table laid for supper—a round of cold beef

in the centre, flanked by a ham and a dozen or so bottles of English beer. Their victim had been warned of their coming by the charwoman aforesaid, and was standing pipe in mouth before the fireplace ready to receive them. On their appearance he greeted them courteously and invited them to remain to supper with him. They accepted, and as they did so it was borne in upon them that he stood well over six feet, was broad in proportion, and also that he had a look in his eye which seemed to suggest that he could take the best possible care of himself and would not be at all averse to giving them proof of it, should they so desire. Not feeling desirous, they put their instruments of music in their pockets and sat down to make themselves agreeable to the best of their ability. When the beef was no longer visible and all that remained of the ham was bone, when the beer bottles were empty and every man had sung his song and told his yarn, to his own if not to his neighbour's satisfaction, the party broke up with many expressions of goodwill. From that day forward de Carnyon was allowed to pursue his own course unmolested, and I am told that to this day he is referred to as the most popular man who ever occupied his studio.

He had now been in England nearly five months, and during the whole of that time he had heard nothing of Loie. Her address seemed to be quite unattainable; and from what he gathered from those whom he asked, it looked as if it would be likely to remain so for some considerable time to come. Her father, it would appear, had dissipated his inheritance in some-

thing under five years. His reign had been a short but merry one, and ever since the day when he had put the white cliffs of Dover behind him, he and his daughter had been compelled to remain religiously in exile.

But though Claude had seen nothing so far of his old Samoan playfellow, he had in a measure made up for it by seeing a great deal of the Hebstones. Despite the fact that he had shaken the dust of Great Coram Street off his feet, he had been careful to retain their acquaintance, and on several occasions he had even gone so far as to attend the place of worship of the flock of whom the old gentleman was shepherd. On each occasion he was more and more struck with the old man's oratory. Though his education was almost nil, and his theology was not as sound as it might have been, he possessed the peculiar power of being able to retain the undivided attention of his congregation for hours at a stretch. And every time he heard him Claude's wonderment increased.

A more complex and extraordinary character did not exist. Though arrogant and dictatorial to a degree, he was still not above petty vices. The income he derived from attending to the spiritual welfare of the Last Day Resurrectionists "it must be confessed was small, but with ordinary care it should have sufficed to support an old man and his daughter in simple comfort. In the case of the Rev. Hebstone it certainly did not do so. Ever since Marcia could remember they had been harassed by difficulties, and the actions of the minister to escape payment of just debts could not

have been considered consistent with his sacred office by even his most enthusiastic admirer. In addition to these commercial peccadilloes, the old gentleman was undoubtedly a Tartar in his own house, and at times was in the habit of leading his daughter a fine life. Not once but several times Claude had been on the point of remonstrating with him, but a moment's reflection convinced him that it would be worse than useless. It had gone on too long to be remedied in a day.

But able as he was to sum up the father's character, when he came to consider the daughter's Claude was compelled to confess himself badly beaten. That Marcia was religious to a degree that bordered on bigotry had been evident to him on his first meeting her: and that she was obstinate beyond the reach of argument would only follow as a natural sequence. To Marcia Hebstone there was no such thing as Art, either literary, musical, or pigment. Her life and mind were closed in, like the district in which she lived, by Oxford Street and the Tottenham Court Road on one side, by the Grays Inn and the Euston Roads on the other; and she only understood the life and character she saw therein. That it was necessary to a human being's existence to read books, to see plays, and to hear beautiful music she would have considered a theory inconsistent with a rational mind. On the other hand, it would have been equally difficult to convince her that there really were people living in the world to whom it was not of the utmost importance to know exactly what sort of personal appearance

they would present when they fronted the Throne on the last Great Judgment Day. It may have been by reason of some unappreciated, but still responsive, note in his own character that Claude de Carnyon found himself being drawn more and more into a genuine liking for this extraordinary girl, who was without one real friend, if one might except her father, who hardly came under that category, in the whole of the universe. That Marcia had developed a liking for him soon became evident.

Where this strange couple had hailed from prior to their appearance in London, Claude had never been able to ascertain. There was some mystery connected with it that had not been properly cleared up so far as he was concerned. And not desiring to pry into their secrets, he had not attempted to press the point. He was their only friend, and they clung to him as to a long-expected legacy. He made it a rule to spend two evenings in every week with them, and every Sunday night he accompanied them to the chapel, sat out the service, and returned with them to Great Coram Street to supper. It was by no means a cheerful life, but he was cram full of spirits, working with the whole strength of his exuberant nature, and as confident of the future as if his fame were already assured to him.

He was now at work on the last chapters of a new book that treated, after his own fashion, of a daring subject, of which many had thought, but, being trammelled with reputations, had dared not put into print. It promised to make or break his fame. His magazine articles were exciting more and more attention every

month, and they were so arranged that they might educate the public up to, and so pave the way for, his new production.

It so happened that the night it was finished and despatched was his evening for visiting the Hebstones.

On the outside of the front door it was by no means pleasant; a thick fog had enveloped the city all day, and now at dusk a steady drizzle was descending. The pavements were streaming wet, the majority of passers-by had their umbrellas up, and all who had homes to go to were hurrying along as fast as they could, intent on being indoors and comfortable as soon as possible.

As he turned into the Euston Road from Charlton Street and steadied his umbrella against a gust of wind that met him at the corner, Claude was run into by somebody. Both looked round from behind their shelters and immediately recognised each other. To his surprise his assailant was Marcia Hebstone.

"Miss Hebstone!" he cried in astonishment. "I must really beg your pardon for being in your way. What a miserable night it is, isn't it? I was on my way to see you."

"We are expecting you, Mr. de Carnyon," she answered. "I am just going up to a street near here to see one of our flock who is on the point of death. If you will go on you will find papa at home, and I shall be back within half an hour."

"I would rather walk back with you, if you will allow me," said Claude. "No, you must not prevent me. I have nothing at all to do, and besides the

pleasure of your society I should really enjoy the walk."

"Very well," she answered, quietly, and perhaps a little ungraciously, "but we must make haste, if you please, for there is no time to lose. The messenger who came for my father said the old lady was almost gone when he left."

"Was your father unable to go, then?" he was going to ask, but fortunately he stopped himself in time.

She had told him that her father was at home, and for the moment it struck him unpleasantly that the old gentleman could not disturb himself sufficiently to turn out of his warm room in order to soothe the last moments of a dying adherent. However, he was too wise to say anything to Marcia on the subject.

For some moments they hurried along in silence, and as they went he looked closer at the thin little figure beside him, cased in the well-worn waterproof, and at the pale, thoughtful face with its habitual expression of dogged determination about the eyes and mouth. He had always felt sorry for her cheerless life, with its bigotry and its complete absence of real comfort, and wondered what sort of flower she would have blossomed into under gentler influences and more artistic surroundings. He felt he would like to show her such a life; to see if she were capable of better things. In his own existence he was beginning to feel the need of some one to love and toil for, some worthier incentive to good work than a mere desire for earthly fame and its accompaniment, a substantial banking account. He wanted some one to cheer him when the

world looked black: some one to comfort him in those hours when the wheels refused to run quite smoothly. And he fancied that when he should have educated her it would be very pleasant to be cheered by Marcia.

He looked at her little feet peeping in and out from beneath her mud-stained skirt, and saw that the cap of one of her boot toes was worn through and that the other had an ominous rent between wind and water. They were passing a shoemaker's shop at the moment, and, knowing how keen was her poverty, he felt he should like to take her in and buy her a new pair. But, of course, such a thing was not to be thought of. In spite of their friendship Marcia would never have forgiven the impertinence of the offer.

By this time they had left Charlton Street behind them and had entered Clarendon Square. Having passed half-way round this dingy place she stopped and insinuated that they had arrived at their destination.

"I shall not be very long, I expect," she said, lowering her umbrella and preparing to leave him.

"Please don't hurry on my account," he answered, politely, and then was struck with the incongruousness of his speech, "I shall find plenty to amuse me while you are gone."

She looked up at him a little reproachfully.

"Ah, yes," she said, "that is always the way with you, Mr. de Carnyon. You will find something with which to amuse yourself wherever you are. Perhaps you imagine I am calling at this house to amuse myself; or that the old lady I am going in here to see

is thinking of amusement. And yet we are all three at this instant equally liable to be called before the Judgment Throne. Oh, Mr. de Carnyon, think of that, I entreat you!"

This outburst was so vehement and so entirely unexpected, that it was some moments before Claude could collect his wits sufficiently to think of anything satisfactory to say in reply. When he did it was too late; she had left him and had entered the house before which they had been standing. He therefore turned upon his heel and began to tramp up and down the pavement while he was waiting for her. Though he did not know it at the time, that walk was destined to embrace the most momentous period in his life's history.

Either on account of her last speech or as a sort of foreshadowing of future events, the whole cheerlessness of the world seemed suddenly to have settled upon him its irremovable melancholy. The steaming pavement, the dull, lead-coloured sky, the greasy puddles, the flickering flames of the street lamps, the rain-stained shop windows, and the hurrying foot-passengers, all served to remind him of his utter loneliness in the world. To-night more than ever he wanted some one to love and to work for, and Marcia, now that Loie was lost to him, was the only woman he knew. As he waited his brain conjured up her pale, determined face, with its self-reliant expression, and in it he thought he saw what he wanted—the countenance of a woman who would make a proud and ambitious wife, one who would keep him on the right path, help him

in his life's work, and share his success with him. But then came the old question, was Loie really lost to him? He was just debating this point with himself when he reached the house again, and found Marcia standing on the steps buttoning up her mackintosh.

As soon as she was ready they set off together in the direction of Great Coram Street. Until they had left Charlton Street, had crossed the Euston Road, and were nearly at Burton Crescent, neither of them spoke. Then Claude said, a little timidly—

"How did you find the old lady? Better, I hope."

"She is dead," returned Marcia briefly, and then after a little pause, "and in her death she let slip her surest hold on Everlasting Life. In her last moments she forsook my father's fold, forgot his teaching, and went back to her old vain belief. When I arrived, I found the vicar of the parish with her. Oh, it was sad to see such a backsliding in one so near her end."

She spoke with such bitterness that Claude felt it would be better to change the subject. They therefore chatted on other matters till they arrived at the house, when he hung up his hat upon a peg in the hall and accompanied her upstairs to the sitting-room.

Having reached it they found the Rev. Hebstone seated in his usual easy-chair in a faded dressing-gown and with his handkerchief still covering his venerable head. It was evident that he had been sleeping placidly, while his former disciple was in extremis, and as his visitor soon discovered, he had not waked in the best of tempers.

He received Claude without rising, with a brief

"Good evening," and then grumbled about the weather, after which he remembered that Marcia had been out, and leisurely inquired after the old lady whom she had gone to visit. On her apostasy being revealed to him he showed neither chagrin nor surprise, and changed the subject by asking how long it would be before the evening meal was likely to be placed upon the table. Marcia promised to hurry it upon its way, and left the room for that purpose.

While she was gone her parent rose from his chair and stood before the empty fireplace. He made a tall, weird figure in his antiquated attire. His feet were clad in a pair of greasy carpet slippers, his trousers were shiny at the knees and much frayed at the ankles, while his waistcoat bore peculiar testimony to the culinary capabilities of his cook. His skin was yellow and lined, his hands were far from clean, and his nails were invariably long and in the depth of mourning. Yet in spite of all this there was something about the man that spoke for him, some magnetic quantity that in most cases made his friends forget for the moment the blemishes in his character, and when that was no longer possible endeavour to invent excuses for them.

At the present moment, if one might judge by the expression of the eyes beneath the shaggy brows, he was trying to make up his mind on some course of action and was wondering what sort of reception it would be likely to receive. Presently he arrived at a determination, cleared his throat, and then began to speak of the various struggles for existence he had seen practised in London. At first he spoke slowly,

as if calculating the exact value of his words; then he warmed to his subject, allowed his usual pulpit style of oratory full play, and, never pausing to think of word or phrase, continued for upwards of half an hour. His eloquence had the usual effect upon Claude, and for the time that the other was speaking the younger man sat entranced, fearful of losing a word. From a recital of the miseries of various cases that had come under his personal observation he passed to those of his acquaintances, and thence, by natural transition, to those of his own household. He painted himself in the light of a martyr, and almost allowed it to be supposed that he lamented the fact that his own steadfastness in the matter of doctrine had prevented his taking advantage of some of the fat prizes of the Established Church, which should have enabled him to support his daughter in the manner to which she was entitled. But, as he took care to point out, Marcia was one in a hundred, and had never complained or allowed him to imagine that she was in any way dissatisfied with her lot in life. This point he insisted on, and when he proceeded to refer, in his most persuasive tones, to the sweetness of her disposition, to her filial piety, to her devotion to the tenets of her religion, and to her strong moral character, Claude, who by this time had quite caught the infection, found himself regarding the girl in a new and entirely different light.

His susceptible heart was touched by the pathetic picture the other had conjured up, and throughout the meal, and for the rest of the evening, he found himself watching her with a deeper feeling of reverence in his

heart than he had ever entertained for her before. Even if she were not quite in sympathy with him in his work, he argued, she would at least be a wife in whom any man might feel confidence, one who would give him love and good counsel and who would help him to the best of her ability to avoid the moral pitfalls and quicksands of this wicked world. She was beautiful, she was virtuous. Her temper was amiable and her manner was refined. One question recurred again and again. Why should he not take the fatal step once for all and ask Marcia Hebstone to become his wife? He felt he would do so if only he knew something more definite about Loie.

The evening meal had been cleared away some time, and they had just lit the lamp. A lodger from downstairs had sent the reverend gentleman the *Globe* newspaper, and he had drawn his chair up to the light to scan the contents, and to comment on them sarcastically, according to custom. In order that everything might be done in its usual fashion he folded the paper in half upon his knee, and having smoothed it out, glanced over the list of Births, Deaths, and Marriages. Something he saw there excited his attention, for he suddenly put the paper down and looked at Claude above his spectacles.

"De Carnyon," he said, "I think this will interest you. 'On the 8th instant, at the English church of St. Paul, Geneva, by the British chaplain, Augustus William, only son of the late John Porter Beckett, of London, to Loie, only surviving child of Denis, sixth Earl of Kilgovan.'"

"Isn't that the old playfellow of whom you have so often told us?" asked Marcia, with quiet interest, as Claude sat too thunderstruck to say anything.

"Yes," he managed to get out at last, "that is Loie. To think of Loie being married! I can hardly believe it!"

"'To Augustus William, son of the late John Porter Beckett, of London.' Why, that must surely be the infamous millionaire son of the notorious old White-chapel brewer: the man who was respondent in that big divorce case last year. One thing is very certain—she has married money."

"She has been sold to him," said Claude, between his clenched teeth; "she has been sold to pay her father's debts. It's monstrous. It's inhuman!"

"Perhaps you are judging by inference," said the old man. "In spite of his reputation he may be a very presentable fellow, this Beckett, and for all we know to the contrary the young folk may be thoroughly in love with each other."

"I fear not. I have a sort of presentiment that they are not. Oh, poor Loie! But there—it is no business of mine, so why should I worry about it? We were children together, but by this time she has probably forgotten that I ever existed. Let dead memories bury their dead. If she's married it's no reason I should hang myself."

At this juncture Mr. Hebstone made an excuse and departed from the room, and Marcia and Claude were left alone together. She was sewing at the table in the centre; he had hitherto been sitting opposite her.

For the first minute or so after her father's departure neither of them spoke. His pride had come to his rescue, and, manlike, oblivious of the fact that hitherto he had not considered himself strictly bound by it, he was reproaching Loie for having forgotten the compact she had made with him that last day in Samoa. With this humiliating feeling of having been discarded in his heart, he looked at Marcia, as she sat with bowed head, her eyes intently fixed upon her work. He thought how pleasant it would be to see her sitting like that in his own home. Again came the question, Why should he not take the bull by the horns, and ask her to marry him? Thus he would be doing himself good, and at the same time be revenging himself upon the faithless Loie. He rose from his chair, and stood beside her for a moment. Then drawing a little nearer, he said quietly—

"Marcia, we have known each other a good many months now, and during those months you have had time to learn to understand me. Do you think you know me well enough to trust yourself altogether to me—that is, to be my wife?"

She looked up at him with a startled face.

"Mr. de Carnyon," she said, "you have no right to ask me such a question."

Her reception of his proposal was not encouraging, but he was not to be balked so easily.

"Marcia," he said earnestly, "don't trifle with me. I have asked you a plain question, and I expect you to give me a plain answer. You must know how much I honour you. I am a lonely man, you are a lonely

woman. Why should we not marry? Then I can devote my life to working for you and——”

“But you do not love me,” she broke in passionately. “Why should you want to marry me if you do not love me?”

“Because I honour you, and I know that my life with you cannot fail to be happier than it is now. Out of my respect love will grow if it be properly nurtured. I will work harder for you than you can imagine. My name is getting known, my work is already appreciated, and it shall be better known and better appreciated when it is for you that I do it.”

“But I don’t understand your work. And then my father? What of him?”

Up to the present this point had not struck de Carnyon. In his own heart he had to confess that he did not want to give an asylum to the Reverend Hebstone. To win Marcia for his wife, however, and to have some human interest in life, he was prepared to make many sacrifices.

“Your father shall share our home with us,” he said. “Between us we will try and make his old age happy. And think, Marcia, how much good you and he may be able to do when we are richer.”

The temptation to this poverty-stricken girl to join forces with a man so handsome and resolute as Claude was almost more than she could bear. To be away from boarding-houses, to be done in a measure with momentary troubles, to have some one to work for her and to think for her, and above all to have a husband and a home of her own—her face flushed at the very

thought. And yet she knew in her inmost heart that she had no love for him, that they were mainly selfish considerations that were inducing her to consent. She rose from her seat and confronted him. The excitement was very nearly too much for her. She had been subsisting on short rations for nearly three weeks past in order that her father might not complain of the household bills, and in consequence was not over-strong.

"Go away," she cried fiercely, feeling that if he persisted she must inevitably go into hysterics. "Oh, go away, for mercy's sake! You don't know how you are tempting me!"

"You consent then, Marcia," he cried, taking her hand in his, and putting his left arm round her waist. "I may consider it settled; you will be my wife."

She only choked in answer and tried to free herself from his grasp. There was even a temptation in the force he was exerting to restrain her. A step sounded in the passage. It was her father coming back to the room.

"You consent, Marcia?" he asked again.

The handle of the door turned.

"I consent," she answered, in a hoarse whisper, and then he released her and stepped back on to the tattered hearthrug. As soon as her father was in the room Marcia fled and left them alone together. It struck Claude that he had an awkward interview before him. However, it had to be got through, so he determined to tackle it at once.

"Mr. Hebstone," he said, when the other had seated

himself in his armchair once more, and was preparing to resume his reading, "I should be glad if you would allow me a few moments' conversation. You may or may not be surprised when I tell you that I have just asked your daughter to be my wife."

"Marcia to be your wife?" the old gentleman cried, with an expression of astonishment that Claude could not help feeling was more than half assumed. "God bless my soul, you don't mean it! And pray what answer has the girl given you?"

"She has consented," said Claude. "And I hope you will ratify her decision with your approval."

"I don't know what to say," returned the other, after a moment's thought. "You see, de Carnyon, it's all very well for you young people, but it will mean a great change in my life, and since her poor lamented mother's death Marcia has been everything to me. We have never been separated in our lives."

"And I hope you won't be now, Mr. Hebstone," said Claude. "I am already doing well in my profession. I am not a lazy man, and by dint of hard work I shall undoubtedly do much better. You have a little money, I suppose. Well, then, if you will join forces with us, we might all live together, and not only be comfortable, but be in a position to extend our sphere of usefulness."

"I must confess that aspect of the case did not strike me," replied the old gentleman. "It is worthy of consideration. In the meantime, when do you propose to be married?"

"As soon as I can get a little home together. Say

three months hence. Would you have any objection to that? I should hardly like to wait longer, and I fear I shall not be in a position to make Marcia really comfortable sooner."

"In three months' time will suit me admirably. Of course I shall not be able to give Marcia a trousseau—but you won't expect it, I know."

"I want only Marcia," said the young man proudly. "If she is content to do without one I'm sure I shall be. We shall begin very quietly, of course—but we shan't be any the worse for that."

"Very well, then, let us consider it settled. I give my consent, and all being well you are to be married in the time you stipulate. I trust you may both be happy."

As he uttered this pious wish he raised his eyes to the ceiling, and at the same time lifted his right hand. The action struck Claude as unreal and somewhat theatrical, but he had grown accustomed to the Reverend Hebstone's little peculiarities by this time, and in consequence they did not irritate him as much as they had done at first.

It was now considerably after ten o'clock, and high time for him to be saying "good-night," and getting home, if he wished to be up to work early on the morrow. He accordingly bade his prospective father-in-law farewell and left the room, intending to knock at Marcia's door on his way downstairs. He was spared this trouble, however, for she was standing waiting for him on the landing outside. Her face was very white, but there was a light in her eyes that Claude knew for that of happiness.

"I have seen your father and told him all," he said, as he took her hand.

"And what did he say?" she asked, looking shyly up at him.

"He gave his consent freely, and hoped we may be happy. I feel sure we shall, don't you, Marcia?"

"I hope we may, Claude," she answered solemnly. "But oh, it seems to me we know so very, very little of each other to be taking so grave a step."

"That's a drawback we shall lessen every day we spend together," he answered lightly. "Marcia, I am not afraid, nor are you in your heart of hearts."

"I fear I am not so brave as you," she said, with a little sigh. "But I will do my best. You believe that, don't you?"

"I believe it," he answered. "I believe that you will be the best little wife I could possibly have, and if that isn't looking well into the future I don't know what is."

"Ah, but you are too sanguine," she said. "You look on the bright side of everything."

"I am not going to look at the dark side of this, at any rate, if that's what you mean."

"I sometimes wish you were a little more serious, Claude," she said, looking up at him. "You are so impetuous, and you take this world so lightly."

"Never mind, dear. I'll do and be everything you wish when we're married. In the meantime, you must forgive me if I feel light-hearted on the night that you are promised to me for my wife. It wouldn't be human nature for me to be otherwise."

As he finished speaking the door of the sitting-room at the end of the passage opened, and the Reverend Hebstone put his head out and said querulously—

“Marcia, you have not brought me my hot water yet, and I find there is next to no whisky in the bottle. It is really too bad that I should be obliged to complain so often.”

“I am very sorry, papa, but I’ll bring it at once,” was his daughter’s reply; then turning to Claude, she said, “I must bid you ‘Good-night’ now, and go and get papa his water.”

“Good-night,” he said. “Sleep well and dream of the happiness that is to be ours in three months’ time. It’s not very long to wait, is it?”

For some reason, one that would have been impossible for her to explain, she shivered as she bade him “Good-night,” and turned to go.

He went slowly down the stairs, passed through the shabby linoleum-covered hall, took his hat from a peg, and then made his way out into the street. As he went down the steps he realised that he had not asked Marcia to seal their compact with a kiss. But this did not strike him as being altogether extraordinary, for somehow Marcia did not strike him as the sort of girl who would care much for kissing; her sad, pale face was not one that would be likely to tempt a lover overmuch. But as this was rather a curious way for a man to think about the girl he had half an hour before asked to be his wife, he changed the current of his thoughts, and began to consider what sort of house he

would choose for his home. In its way it must be unique, small, yet exquisitely comfortable. There would probably be a dining-room, drawing-room, and study on the first floor, and three bedrooms upstairs. So much was imperative. The rest would be a matter of luck. Planning all this as he marched along he was at his studio before he had done much more than choose the carpet for the hall and stairs.

He unlocked the front door and went inside. It was pitch dark, but while he had been at Great Coram Street the rain had drawn off, and now, on looking up through the skylight, he could see the heavens bright with stars.

For some unaccountable reason, ever since he had put the key in the lock he had become strangely nervous. This led him to knock half the things off his mantelpiece before he could find the box of matches. At last, however, he did discover it, and, having found the bracket, lit the gas.

There was neither the corpse of a murdered man upon the bed nor an Anarchist Death Warrant pinned to the door. In other words the studio was just as he had left it, the table in the centre littered with papers, a half-finished picture on the easel, a kettle on the hearth, and an old painting-coat on a nail behind the door. He could find nothing to account for the feeling which had taken possession of him.

At last a thought struck him, and he went across to the post-box behind the front door. It contained three letters, which he carried back to the light.

The first was from the editor of an important

magazine congratulating him upon the cleverness of his first published book, and offering to consider any short stories he might care to send on approval. This he filed, to be attended to later on, and then took up the second. It was from the literary agent to whom he had been induced to confide the management of his affairs, and informed him that the publishers of his first novel had accepted the second, and then proceeded to detail the terms, which he was thankful to see were infinitely better than those he had obtained for his first. He filed that also, and then examined the last letter. It was in a handwriting that was quite unknown to him and bore a French stamp. Moreover, it did not come to him direct, but had been forwarded by his publishers, to whose care it had been addressed. He turned it over and looked at the expensive paper and the raised crest, and then, having broken the seal, withdrew the contents.

It was written from Paris and bore the address of the Hotel de Luxe. Directly he saw the first line he turned the paper swiftly over and looked at the signature. It was from Loie. On this night of all others he received his first communication from his boyish sweetheart. It was a long letter and ran as follows:—

“MY DEAR CLAUDE,—‘Talofa alii,’ as we used to say in Samoa. This morning when I was out shopping I happened to chance upon an English bookseller’s shop. On his counter, to my delighted surprise, I discovered a work bearing as its writer’s name, Claude de Carnyon. Surely, I thought to myself, there cannot

be two of that uncommon name in the world of authors. At any rate, I was prepared not to believe in the coincidence, so I purchased the book, and now hasten to write you a line to the care of your publishers to tell you how happy I am about it. Can it be possible that after all we are soon likely to see each other again? For after another weary exile I too am returning to England. What a meeting it will be, won't it? I will write and give you my address as soon as we reach London, and then you must come and see me without a moment's delay. I long to hear all your news, as you may imagine; and now perhaps you would like a little of mine.

"After we left the island—oh, the dear old island, how I should like some day to see it again!—my father posted straight off with me to Ireland, where we were received with open arms by the countryside. Our Irish home, you must know, was within an hour's drive of Dublin, and while our London house was being prepared for us we settled down there. At first I don't think I was altogether happy, in spite of the novelty of my position. I wanted the dear old island where I knew everybody, and perhaps I was a little sorry to have lost my old playfellow. But when the season came round and we went to London, I learnt for the first time what life was really like, and soon fell into the swing of it. At first I was too young, of course, to go out much, but as soon as I was old enough I was presented at Court, and am vain enough to tell you that I created a prodigious sensation. Her Majesty was most kind, and several notabilities said nice

things, so that I soon gained confidence and began to enjoy myself immensely.

“That particular season I was all the rage, partly, let us hope, on account of my looks, but more, I suspect, on account of papa’s money. Before August I had received no less than fourteen offers of marriage, including a foreign prince, a duke, two earls, an armful of lords, and more baronets and commoners than I could count upon both fingers. It was great fun, and I know you will believe me when I say that I made the most of it. Papa was to the fore in everything; he had racehorses and yachts, that cost mints of money but never won a prize or a cup; he had twice as many houses, servants, horses and carriages as he had any need for or he could possibly ever hope to use, the most expensive cook in Europe, and, in fact, went the pace so fast that the fifth year found us on the verge of bankruptcy, and the next out of England, looking very much as if we should never return to it again. Ever since then we have lived abroad, for a year in France, then in Italy, and last in Switzerland.

“Of the next piece of news I will give you but the baldest facts and leave you to imagine the rest. Three days ago I was married at the English Church, Geneva, to a Mr. Augustus Beckleton, only son of the eminent brewer and philanthropist of, I think, the Mile End Road. My father, who has gone into the matter very thoroughly, would be able to tell you more about him than I can, but there is one thing of which you may be very sure, and that is that he is a millionaire two or three times over. Our engagement was

brought about by as much diplomacy as would have settled the fate of a kingdom; and when all was arranged, we were married very quietly, and came on here after the ceremony, where we shall remain until papa's lawyers have compounded—I believe that is the term—with his creditors in England. Then we shall come back in triumph to resume as far as possible our old life.

“To tell you how I long to hear all your news would not give you any idea of my feeling. Your success, they tell me, is now quite assured. Oh, Claude, I am so very, very glad. Go on and show them what you can do, and remember that directly I arrive you are to come and see me for old sake's sake, and tell me all your story. Remember, no one takes a keener interest in your doings or is more proud of your success than

“Your old playfellow,

“LOUE.”

CHAPTER III

CLAUDE TURNS DRAMATIST

When he had finished Loie's curious epistle, Claude found himself sitting motionless with it in his hand, staring hard at the opposite wall. So Loie was married—beautiful little Loie, with whom he used to play happily on the island, and round whom he used to weave so many romances. It seemed impossible that it could be so; that she had preferred another to himself, after all her promises. And yet there it was, in her own handwriting, to convince him. He understood the letter perfectly, and the reference to her husband's wealth grated on him almost as much as she evidently desired and intended it should do. He imagined the scorn that must have flashed in her eyes as she penned those words, and he quite understood what she meant when she asserted that her father could tell him more about her bridegroom than she knew herself. "Poor little Loie!" he said to himself. "So, after all your ambition, your beautiful young life has been sacrificed to another's greed." Yes, when she came to England he certainly would call upon her. And, what was more, he would take Marcia to see her. Any resentment he had felt towards her when he first heard the news had quite died away by this time, and

now he was only filled with pity that she should have ended a career of so much promise in this sordid fashion.

When he went to bed he lay for hours thinking of the only two women with whom he had come much in contact in his life—Marcia, the sad-eyed and solemn, and Loie, whom he remembered so young, beautiful, and wilful. When all was said and done, with which would he have been the better man? But this he felt was a question disloyal to Marcia, so he put it away and returned to the consideration of his house-furnishing. Still, try how he would to prevent it, the thought of Loie, who had sold her beautiful young life for the brewer's gold, came back upon him and would not be driven out. With it the idea of a new story began to shape itself in his head. He lay staring up at the stars through the glass in the studio roof, thinking, thinking, thinking. Still the same idea worked its way through his brain, and reiterated its chief points with relentless persistency. It took dramatic form at last, and in his mind's eye he seemed to see it being acted upon the stage with all the appropriate scenery and costume. Then, like a flash of lightning on a summer night, another thought came to him. Why should he not make a play of it? The thought was no sooner born in his brain than he sprang out of bed and lit his gas. In less than five minutes he had dressed himself sufficiently to prevent himself from taking cold, and was seated at his table. Then drawing pen and paper towards him he began to write. Without thought of time he worked on and on. It was a case of genuine

inspiration, and the characters walked on to the stage and ranged themselves before him, played their parts, and made their entrances and exits like human beings. He was simply putting on paper what he saw them do and heard them say, and by the time the milkman put down his cans with a clatter on the stones outside, and rapped upon the door, the play was finished. Then he went to bed and slept like a top.

When he rose again he read what he had written, half-expecting to find it crude and useless. But to his surprise it was instinct with life and motion; the dialogue was to the point, terse, and epigrammatic, pathos and humour blended to a nicety. The situations were dramatic, and the tragedy at the close seemed consistent with the general idea of the story. Here and there it needed a little retouching and writing up, but on the whole he knew he should not be able to better it very much. The next thing to be decided was what to do with it. He was not going to put it by. His tide was at the flood, and he was going to make the most of it. So rolling up the MS. he placed it in his pocket, and having locked his door, went out into the street. It was but a short walk to Hampstead Road, and within ten minutes of leaving the studio he was on an omnibus making his way to the West End. It was not his intention to eat humble pie, or in any way to belittle the value of his work, so he intended to tackle the high gods first, and only in the event of their refusing, to try lower down. Having walked along Oxford Street he turned down a side street which he knew would bring him out within a

hundred yards or so of the Shakspeare Theatre, and made his way towards it.

Having reached it he inquired where he could find the manager, and on being informed made his way to a side entrance in the direction indicated. A commissioner was on duty at the door, and asked his business.

"I wish to see Mr. Claverson, if you please," said Claude boldly. "I should be glad if you would give him my card, and tell him I will not detain him very long."

The commissioner took the card as requested, and disappeared down a passage. While he was gone Claude waited in the doorway, reading the notices on the call board, and wondering if he should ever see the name of his piece figuring there.

Now it so happened that that very morning, prior to rising from the connubial couch, the manager had been reading "His Firm Conviction," and had been struck with the general tone of it. He recognised the smartness of the dialogue and the unusual sense of dramatic proportion shown throughout the book, and he had wondered whether the author had ever turned his thoughts to the making of a play. He was in search of one at that moment. He took the card from the commissioner's hand and glanced at it.

"Claude de Carnyon," he said reflectively. "Now, where have I heard that name before? Ah, I remember. Why, he's the very man I was thinking of this morning; the author of 'His Firm Conviction.' Send him in, Wilkins."

"Very good, sir," replied Wilkins, and returned to usher the young man into the managerial presence.

"Good morning, Mr. de Carnyon," said the manager, when Claude made his appearance in the sanctum and took the seat proffered him. "What can I have the pleasure of doing for you?"

"I want you to listen to a play I have written, if you will be so kind," said Claude.

"Is it typewritten? If so, and you will leave it with me, it shall have my best attention. Unfortunately, I expect some people here in a few minutes, so that I'm afraid I cannot give you sufficient time this morning."

Claude did not say that he did not believe him, for the reason that that would be impolitic as affairs stood, but he did the next best thing to it—he took the manuscript from his pocket and smoothed it out upon the table.

"It will not take very long," he said. "If I hurried I could give a synopsis of it in, say, a quarter of an hour. At any rate, if you'll let me, I'll go on till your visitors arrive."

The manager smiled. This, he told himself, was, without doubt, an original sort of a creature, and deserved to be honoured as such. Besides, had he not himself thought of him for a play that selfsame morning? He began to regard himself in the light of a patron of genius, and the developer of unconscious talent.

"Very well, go on," he said. "I'll tell you when to stop."

Thereupon Claude began. In a few brief sentences he sketched the outline of the story—showed how the scenes fell in, and where he thought the dramatic chances existed. After which he began his dialogue.

At first the manager hardly listened, but later on he was attracted by an epigram and a wittily turned sentence. He paid more attention after that, and had certain parts re-read to him. By the time he reached the end of the second act he was enthusiastic. He rose and rang the bell, which was answered by the same commissioner who had shown Claude into his presence.

"I am not in to anybody, Wilkins," he said. "Remember that, and don't disturb me."

The commissioner bowed and left the room, shutting the door carefully after him.

"Ah!" said Claude to himself, "this begins to look like business. The iron is evidently hot, and it only remains for me to strike while I have the chance."

The manager sat down in his chair, and, leaning back, looked at the dramatist.

"That seems pretty good," he said encouragingly. "Now read me your last act."

Claude smiled and did as he was ordered. The other heard him to the end. When the curtain had dropped on the final tragedy the author looked up at the manager and said—

"There it is. Now, what do you think of it?"

The manager was balanced between business reticence and artistic admiration.

"It looks as if it would be admirable when touched up a bit," he said at last, "and if we could arrange terms I might see my way to producing it."

"I'll talk terms with you now. There's nothing like promptness. What do you offer?"

"Five per cent. of the profits."

"Thank you," said Claude. "I'm afraid that isn't quite usual, is it? I believe I ought to ask five per cent. of the gross takings; but I'm young at the business, and if you will agree to produce the piece I'll take three—that is, of course, reserving to myself all the usual rights."

"Give me a few hours to think it over," said the manager. "Let me have your address, and I'll wire you this evening. In the meantime, leave me the manuscript."

Claude wrote his address on the budget of MS., and then bade the other "Goodbye." When he got into the street he felt inclined to dance a fandango to express his joy. He could hardly believe his good fortune. Why would night not come quicker, that he might know his fate? If his play were only produced and well received his fortune would be made, and then Marcia and he (he resolved to put it that way) would have money enough and to spare. He took the train home again, and without wasting time sat down to his new book. He was on the high-road to Fortune, and he felt that it was doubly incumbent upon him not to grow lazy by the way. Another thought struck him. How pleased Loie would be! But he instantly reflected that he had no right to think of Loie first. Marcia was his affianced wife. But the question was, would Marcia be pleased?

The afternoon dragged its slow length along. The day had been hot, and the night was very close. He kept his door open for coolness, but really that he

might hear the telegraph messenger's step the sooner. Until it had become too dark to see, he had been hard at work. Then he had lit his pipe and stood at his studio door, watching the faces of the passers-by, and trying to understand from them what sort of lives their owners led.

At eight o'clock no telegram had arrived, and he was beginning to grow anxious. All his happiness seemed to be at stake. He went in and lit the gas, then, drawing up a chair to the table, sat down and began to make a list of the furniture he would require for his house. The work interested and pleased him, and it had the additional advantage of keeping his thoughts occupied for nearly an hour. Then there was the sound of a quick young step upon the path outside, and the next moment a telegraph boy stood upon the threshold with a message in his hand. To take it from him was the work of an instant. He tore open the envelope and read—

“Will take play on terms named. Call here at eleven to-morrow.”

“Thank God!” he said, reverently, and laid the message down upon the table. As he did so he again heard a step outside. To his surprise his next visitor was Marcia.

“Why, Marcia,” he cried, crossing to receive her, “this is an unexpected pleasure. What does it mean?”

“I have brought a note from papa,” she said. “I

don't know what it is about, but he said he should be glad of an answer."

She handed him the note, and when he had offered her a seat he opened it and read it.

"DEAR CLAUDE" (it ran)—"I find myself suddenly placed in an unexpected difficulty not unconnected with a trifling tradesman's account. If you would let me borrow, say five pounds, from you for a few days, I should be infinitely obliged. One does not care to be under obligations to tradesmen, but with one's own family it is a different matter. Marcia will wait.

"Yours truly,

"JOSIAH HEBSTONE."

Claude went across to where his coat was hanging, and when he had given the garment a shake, put it on. Then he took a five-pound note from his pocket-book, and having retired into his scullery so that Marcia should not see, scribbled a few lines on a sheet of paper, enclosed it with the money, and gave the envelope to his sweetheart. Then he led her outside, locked the door, and accompanied her home. As her father was not very well she would not let him come in, so they parted on the steps.

"You have not regretted, Marcia?" he said, as he held her hand after saying goodbye.

"No," she answered, with the first smile she had shown since he had proposed to her. "I certainly have not regretted. Have you?"

"How can you ask such a question?" he replied. "I feel certain that I never shall."

"I hope not. Good-night."

"Good-night."

She let herself in, and he went back again down the street. As he crossed the Euston Road he remembered that he had forgotten to tell her about the play.

CHAPTER IV

WEDDING BELLS

The days and weeks slipped quickly by until the three stipulated months that were to elapse before Claude's wedding had almost expired. During that time he had not been idle for an instant. His new book had come out and had created an enormous sensation. Its original treatment of a daring subject, combined with a certain peculiarity of style, had roused a storm of controversy that had shaken literary England to its core. A certain illustrious statesman had given it as his deliberate opinion in a high-class monthly that its inferred Atheistic tendency was likely to prove harmful to the general run of novel readers, and this notice, instead of prejudicing its sale, had the effect of drawing public attention still more closely to it, and thereby causing a more determined run on it than ever. During the first month of its existence no less than three fashionable preachers had declaimed against it from the pulpit, and at the end of the fourth week the sixth edition was announced as exhausted, while a seventh was declared to be already bespoken. Its bright crimson cover, gold lettering and device, had by this time come to form an integral part of every bookstall and shop window, while no drawing-

room table, in easy-going households, that is to say, appeared to be complete without it. Within six weeks of its first appearance "God's Microcosms" had reached a sale of fifty thousand copies in England alone; while it was reported to have almost doubled that number on the other side of the Atlantic.

From being a comparatively unknown author Claude suddenly awoke to find himself famous. Offers that, a few weeks before, he would have considered fabulous, came showering in upon him from all sides, and, had he been desirous of so doing, he could have sold the new work upon which he was engaged a dozen times over for almost a hundred times the sum he had obtained for his first literary endeavour.

The astute manager of the Shakspeare Theatre was not slow to profit by the success his young dramatist had achieved. "A Martyr of Society" was in active preparation, and its production was definitely announced for the first Saturday in November. Already the papers were flooded with mysterious paragraphs concerning it, and, to judge by the popular prints, one might have been tempted to believe that there was only one dramatist or novelist in the world, and that his name was de Carnyon.

Great as was his success, however, Claude did not take it seriously or make any change in the routine of his life. His balance at his banker's was growing larger every day, but though he could now well afford to launch out, he saw no reason for leaving the studio. He told himself there would be plenty of time to make a change after he was married. When that event

was celebrated he was going to take a flat in Kensington for six months, and during that time look about him for their permanent home.

Somehow or other he had never yet spoken to Marcia of his work, nor had she in talking to him ever referred to it. As she never read the morning paper, and her father had quarrelled with the lodger downstairs, and in consequence no longer received his *Globe*, it was extremely doubtful whether she even knew that a play of her *fiance's* writing was about to be produced, while it was plainly evident that she had no possible notion of the success his last book had achieved. To any other man this would have constituted a barrier sufficient to prevent marriage. But to Claude it did nothing of the kind. On the contrary, he rather enjoyed the novelty of the situation than otherwise. He had invested his future wife with all the attributes of an earthly saint, and it seemed quite as impossible that she should take any interest in such mundane affairs as plays and books, as that he could appreciate the proper tenets of the Last Day Resurrectionists. It was sufficient for him that she should be an absolutely good woman; one who could be as honest and true as the daylight, like Cæsar's wife above suspicion, and a good mother to his children if he ever had any. Indeed, when he came to think of it, there was a something about Marcia's self-denial and striving after godliness that made him almost afraid of her. It did not seem as if an ordinary man, such as he considered himself, could be good enough to live his life beside her.

Her father was of a different stamp altogether. Claude soon discovered that he could get on with him so well that on closer acquaintance he began to despise him. The old man's greed, his continual monetary difficulties, and his perpetual excuses for obtaining small loans which he never by any chance repaid, would have engendered the same feeling in the most amiable of men. That the Rev. Hebstone regarded his future with a favourable eye was evident to the least observant. Was he not exchanging his out-at-elbow lodgings in Great Coram Street for a fashionable *ménage* in an aristocratic quarter, and at the same time shifting the burden of his own and his daughter's support to younger and more capable shoulders? His anxiety to get the wedding over, and have everything settled and done with, was almost pitiable. Hardly a day passed without his making some inquiry as to the progress of affairs, and when at last the date was fixed, and the arrangements completed, his satisfaction knew no bounds.

The Reverend Hebstone's tabernacle not being licensed for the solemnisation of marriages, and his religious scruples preventing his sanctioning its performance in any place of worship other than his own, it was settled that the ceremony should be conducted before the Registrar for the district. The honeymoon was to be spent at Brighton, and after a week's absence the young couple were to return to South Kensington, and take up their new life in that fashionable quarter.

Claude spent the evening preceding his wedding-day with Marcia and her father, and returned to the studio

about ten o'clock. For some reason he was not altogether happy, and yet, argue with himself as he would, he could not understand why. By the light of one solitary candle, for he had paid his gas bill and finished with the meter that day, the studio looked very desolate; all his belongings, save those he needed for his last night's comfort, had been packed and sent off to his new home, and now there only remained the camp bedstead in the corner, the ink-stained table in the centre, and a few pots and pans which he intended to bequeath to a less fortunate neighbour when he should have cooked his last breakfast with them. He looked round the room and thought of the pretty home for which he was exchanging it.

His reverie ended, he crossed to the letter-box behind the door, to see if there was anything there for him. Yes, a letter was lying at the bottom, and when he carried it to the light he discovered that it was from Loie. Her letters always seemed to reach him at the most vital periods of his existence. He felt almost angry with his old playfellow that on the very night when he desired that his thoughts should be most with Marcia, she should have come as a sort of disturbing influence between them.

He opened the letter and looked at it. It bore traces of having been written in great haste, and was addressed from the same hotel as the previous communication he had received from her. It ran as follows:—

“HOTEL DE LUXE, PARIS.

“MY DEAR CLAUDE,—An old friend has sent me the

Morning Post, and in it I see an announcement of your approaching marriage. I hasten to offer you every good wish. May your bride fulfil all your hopes, and may your future life be as successful as it has been hitherto. I shall think of you on the eventful day you may be sure, and hope soon to know your wife.

“Your affectionate friend,

“LOIE BECKLETON.”

Claude read it through a second time and then tore it into shreds. There was something in that expression “may your bride fulfil all your hopes” that made him furious. Of course Marcia would fulfil all his hopes. If he thought not he would not be marrying her.

At this point he sat himself down on his bed, and, dropping his chin on to his hands, gave himself up to thought. He reviewed his life and its work, and tried to formulate his hopes for the future. By this time to-morrow, all being well, he would have taken the irrevocable step, and if either of them found then that they had made a mistake it would be too late to turn back. Too late! He said it over again with a little shiver. It was characteristic of the man that he was not so much afraid of Marcia as of himself. He knew her nature, he thought, by this time, and felt he could rely upon it more than upon his own. He rose to his feet and began to pace the bare floor in anxious thought. He knew that Marcia did not love him, and that he did not love her. He doubted very much if on her side there was any real feeling of respect. He had

also a sort of painful conviction that she was only making the sacrifice for her father's sake, in order to lift him out of the mire of debt and difficulty, and to find him an assured home for his old age. All this was very noble he knew, but was it a fit and proper reason for indissolubly linking together two human lives? On the other hand, he was perfectly well aware that whatever he might think, as a man of honour, there was no possibility of his drawing back at this late hour. And if there were he would not take it. No, he would go through with it to the best of his ability, and trust to Providence to guide him aright. Having made up his mind on this point he went to bed, but not to sleep. The striking of every hour found him still awake, thinking and thinking with all his might and main.

Shortly before daylight he dozed off, and dreamed a dream. It seemed to him that he was back again on an island in the Pacific. It was not Upolu, for this place he had never seen before. It was bleak and cheerless, and rose from the sea in mountainous uplands towards the centre. It struck him, moreover, that he was not visiting the place in the flesh, but rather in a spiritual body, looking for something that was very difficult to find. He had searched among the huts of the scattered native village along the shore, but it was not there; had climbed the side of the mountain, but still the search was unsuccessful. Suddenly ahead of him, beneath a group of palms on the cliff edge, he saw a fluttering of garments in the wind. He hurried towards the spot to find a man

lying there, stretched upon his back, dead. The mouth had dropped, and the sightless eyes were staring up to where a flock of white birds wheeled in the windy expanse of heaven. Horrified at what he saw, he stooped and looked closer at the man; then with a cry that was inaudible—for it must be remembered he was only a spirit—he fell down upon his knees, and buried his face in his hands. That man was himself!

When he looked again he discovered he was not alone. Two women were watching beside the dead. Their faces were covered with their hands—but he had no need to see their countenances to discover who they were. They were Marcia and Loie. He spoke to them, but they could not hear, they only rocked themselves to and fro, and moaned. Then just as he was about to question them again he woke, perspiring from every pore. The dream had been so real that for some minutes he could not shake off the fear that had taken possession of him. He could not understand it. Surely it must have some meaning, he thought. For weeks he had been too busy to think of the Pacific save in a casual way, and even then he was quite certain he had never seen that particular island before.

Feeling that it was quite impossible to try to go to sleep again, he rose and dressed himself. Then, having made himself a cup of tea, he drank it, and went out into the street intent upon a long walk. He was not due at the Registrar's office until twelve o'clock, and the time looked as if it would hang heavily on his hands.

. Leaving the studio, he set off and tramped by way of

Chalk Farm Road to Hampstead, and leaving that thriving suburb on his left, he crossed the Heath to Dartmouth Park and returned to Camden Town by Kentish Town Road. The walk did him good. It swept the cobwebs from his brain, and by the time he got back to the studio he was a new man. He then set to work and dressed himself in his new clothes, after which he hailed a cab and drove to the Registrar's office.

It was not by any means an imposing place, and when he entered Claude found it difficult to believe that he had come into this little pokey room, in which still lingered the smell of last night's tobacco smoke, to undertake the greatest responsibility of his life. While he was talking to the Registrar he heard the sound of wheels drawing up outside, and next moment he saw Mr Hebstone helping his daughter to alight from a four-wheeler. A little later they entered the office and, when all was prepared, Claude and Marcia took their places before the Registrar's table. Marcia was attired in a dark blue travelling dress that showed her pretty figure and pale complexion to the best advantage. Her father was tricked out in a bran new clerical costume to which he lent an air of peculiar dignity. The ceremony was not a long one, and almost before he knew it had begun, Claude found himself putting a ring on Marcia's finger and the Registrar pronouncing them, to the buzzing of a few half-stupefied flies on the window-pane and the jingling of a piano organ outside, man and wife. There was something almost ghastly about the matter-of-fact

speed with which the whole business had been accomplished. That it might, however, be made a little more impressive than it would otherwise have been, the Reverend Hebstone requested permission to say a few words. This favour being granted with no good grace, for the Registrar was anxious to be off to his dinner, the old gentleman commenced an address which lasted the better part of half an hour. When it was finished and the customary fees had been paid, the wedding party left the house, Marcia on her husband's arm. An hour later the happy couple were at Victoria, seated in the train for Brighton.

It was the first time that Marcia had ever travelled in luxury, and the situation was very novel to her. Claude was proud of his pale-faced but beautiful wife, and would have given her anything she might have asked and his pocket could have afforded, in addition to the gold bracelet that encircled her wrist. But she shrank instinctively from extravagance of any kind, and even viewed the first-class carriage in which they were travelling with a sort of horror. The Reverend Hebstone had been left behind to fend for himself as best he could till his children returned. It was not until they were fairly under way and the express was dashing along past Clapham Junction that Claude realised that he was now the old gentleman's legal son-in-law. Somehow the thought did not strike him altogether as a pleasing one.

A little before they reached their destination Claude took his wife's hand, and, while he held it, asked her if she was happy.

"Yes," she answered timidly, but without looking into his face.

"Then why are you so quiet?" he asked, resolved to try to find out what was ailing her.

"I am naturally very quiet," she answered. Then as if she must speak the thoughts that were in her mind, she said, "Oh, Claude, you will bear with me to-day, won't you? I can't realise yet what I have done. Be good to me, Claude, or I don't know what will become of me."

"Good to you, Marcia?" he cried. "Of course I will be good to you. Are you ill, dear, or what is it makes you talk like this?"

"There is nothing the matter with me," she answered. "But I think the excitement has been a little too much for me."

She dared not tell him that she was beginning to think she had done wrong in allowing herself to marry him when she knew it was only for her father's sake. The temptation had been so great, and she had fallen. The thought was agony to her.

At last they reached Brighton and left the train. While Claude was looking after their belongings, Marcia stood idly on the platform, dodging passengers and porters with trucks of luggage. Presently the bookstall came under her notice, and she strolled across to it. The first thing that caught her eye was a placard printed in large type referring to the last new novel by Claude de Carnyon. It bore a number of Press notices in smaller type at its foot, and, Claude not being forthcoming, she began to read them. They

were all alike. All highly laudatory, but all referring in the same set tones to the daring nature of the subject treated of in the book. One in particular riveted her attention. It was from an artistic monthly of considerable importance, and ran as follows: "Whatever may be the opinion of the general public concerning the moral aspect of the book, there can be but one voice as to its literary merit. It is art, and art of the very highest order. Even if Mr. de Carnyon's thoughts on certain matters of the Christian faith are not quite in accord with our own, there can be no doubt at all that in this extraordinarily clever book he has thrown an entirely new light upon the subject of our religion, and one that is certain to cause a vast amount of controversy in the near future."

As she finished reading Claude came into view, followed by a porter with their luggage. She fell into step behind him, and together they made their way to the cab rank. A hansom was soon obtained, and the luggage having been placed upon the roof, and the porter rewarded, Claude helped his wife to her place, stepped in beside her, and they started for their hotel. A few moments later there burst upon their view the sea. A brisk breeze was blowing, and big waves were tumbling in glorious confusion upon the beach. It was the first time Claude had seen the sea since his arrival in England, and the very sight of it made him gasp with joy and longing. He looked from it to Marcia, who sat in the corner repeating over and over to herself the words she had read upon the bookstall placard. What were the topics treated of in her hus-

band's book? she was asking herself. Why should the critics consider Claude's book so daring? And why should the general public be divided in their opinions about it? The idea disquieted her. She wished she had not read the placard.

When they arrived at their hotel she alighted first and went into the building. The steps led into a small vestibule, and thence into a handsome hall built in the form of a square, with seats placed about in it. A cheerful fire was burning in a large, old-fashioned grate at the further end, and a considerable number of people were seated and standing round it, talking and reading the papers. Close by where she waited, two elderly gentlemen were standing. The taller, who had but that moment come downstairs, turned to the shorter, and said—

"What are all the folk down here for, Williamson?"

His friend sank his voice a little, but not so much as to prevent Marcia hearing what he said.

"They're waiting to see this Claude de Carnyon who is expected directly. The manager says he telegraphed to say he should arrive by this train."

"Claude de Carnyon!" said the other. "And who the dickens may he be?"

"Why, the writing man, to be sure. The author of the book, 'God's Microcosms,' that they're all raving about. I haven't read it myself, but my wife tells me I'm not to buy it for the girls."

"Is that so? Why, what's the matter with it? Indecent?"

"A good deal that way, I should imagine. But from

what I can gather, more blasphemous than anything else."

"Wonder why they let such books be printed?" said his companion. "A father of a family of girls might so easily put his foot in it if he didn't chance to see the reviews."

Marcia moved away; she could bear to hear no more. Feeling sick and giddy, she waited until Claude had questioned the manager about their rooms, and then, preceded by a servant, accompanied him upstairs. It was nearly four o'clock, and the sky was overcast with clouds, so that the room, when they entered it, struck them as dark and cheerless. She shivered, and walked to the window.

"You're cold, Marcia, I'm afraid," said her husband, when the servant had departed. "The manager should have had the sense to have had a good fire ready for us. I'll ring the bell, and have it lit at once. On second thoughts I think I'll do it myself."

He went over to the fireplace, and, stooping down, struck a match and lit the paper beneath the sticks and coal. It caught quickly, and very soon the wood was ablaze. He then wheeled an armchair up beside it, and bade his wife seat herself. She did so without either thanks or protest, and sat looking at the flames. Claude could not understand her behaviour at all. Quiet as she always was, he had never seen her like this before. He was about to question her when the servant entered again with afternoon tea. As soon as he had put down the tray and left the room Claude poured out a cup of tea and gave it to Marcia. She

took it and drank it, but still without a word. Then she suddenly rose to her feet.

"Claude," she said, trying to speak quietly, "I want you to get me a copy of your last book. The one that is advertised so much."

"Of course I will," he answered, glad to find her trying to take an interest in his work. "You shall have a copy of it first thing to-morrow morning."

"No, not to-morrow morning," she answered. "I must see it to-night. I want you to get it for me at once. I feel as your wife I ought to know more of your work, now that every one is talking of it."

"But I can't go out and get a copy at once," he said, amazed at her request. "Surely you don't want to read it to-night?"

"To-night, Claude; I must see it before I sleep," she cried. "Oh, you don't know how wicked I feel for not having read it before."

Her conduct seemed to him to be growing more and more inexplicable every minute. She appeared to be getting hysterical; and to pacify her he promised to go out at once and procure a copy of the work in question.

As he went down the stone staircase a vague sense of impending calamity was upon him, and when he stepped out of the front door into the street he felt almost inclined to cry off his errand and turn back. For the first time the construction that a deeply religious woman would be likely to place upon his work struck him, and almost took his breath away. He had written the book under the influence of a feeling that

was in no sense immoral, yet now that he looked at it through his wife's eyes, it wore a completely different aspect.

As they had driven from the station he had noticed a large bookseller's shop at the corner of the street. He wended his way towards it, and when he reached it stood for a moment looking into the window.

Copy after copy of his first work stared him in the face, but not one of the second, though a card hanging from a flaring gas-bracket above the door, proclaimed in six-inch letters the fact that it could be obtained within. Summoning up his courage, for it required all the pluck he possessed to make the purchase, he opened the door and went inside. Nemesis, in the shape of a little grey-haired man with bright, twinkling eyes and a ruddy complexion, stood behind the counter waiting for him.

"I see you advertise copies of 'God's Microcosms,' " said Claude. "Will you let me have one?"

The little man bowed politely and rubbed his hands together.

"I regret to say, sir, that we're quite out of it," he replied. "We've had a very large supply, but there's a great run on the book just at present. We shall be having more copies in a day or two, when I shall be delighted to send you one."

"I'm afraid that will not do," said Claude. "I must have one to-night. Can you direct me to another shop where I should be likely to procure it?"

"Certainly, sir," the man replied. "There is Burden's on this side about a hundred yards down, and

Warmley's on the other, at the corner. I'm exceedingly sorry we can't supply you."

"So am I. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir," said the affable shopman, and bowed him out. When the door closed on Claude he turned to his fellow-assistant and said, "Another 'Microcosm.' What a run there is on that book, to be sure! If the author ain't a happy man he ought to be."

From this it may be inferred that in some minds success is synonymous with happiness.

Luck seemed both for and against Claude, as he chose to take it; for though he tried both the places to which he had been recommended, he was unable to obtain that of which he stood in need. At last, however, in a much smaller shop in a side street he was rewarded, and turned in the direction of the hotel with his purchase under his arm.

Reaching his sitting-room again, he found Marcia still seated in the armchair staring into the fire. He handed her the book, and she retired with it into her bedroom. He respected her privacy, and for nearly two hours sat alone in the room waiting for her to return. At the end of that time the same impassive servant who had introduced them to their apartment came in to lay the table for dinner. While he was engaged on this work Claude went to his dressing-room and changed his attire. By the time he returned dinner was on the table and a neat chambermaid was standing inside the door.

"Mrs. de Carnyon desires me to tell you, sir, that

she does not feel very well and will not take any dinner this evening."

This message was almost too much for Claude's equanimity, but he was not going to let the maid witness his discomfiture, so he said, "Very well," and sat down to his meal alone. It was difficult to believe that this could be his wedding-day.

He was not hungry, but he forced himself to eat, in order that the servant waiting upon him should not think anything was amiss. The meal finished, he lit a cigarette and stood before the fire. It was then half-past eight, and he had not seen his wife for more than three hours. The remorseless hands of the clock crawled slowly round the dial till they stood at ten o'clock. By this time he had reached such a state of nervous tension that he felt if things did not come to a crisis soon he should be obliged to do something to accelerate it. At that moment he heard a light step in the dressing-room which adjoined the sitting-room. The handle of the door turned and his wife entered, carrying his book. He was about to greet her, but she stopped him by holding up her hand.

"I have read your book," she said, throwing it on the table and speaking in a hard, dry voice, "and I cannot tell you what I think of it. I can only say this—that if I had read it before to-day, I should never have dreamed of allowing myself to become your wife. May God forgive me for innocently taking the devil's side against Him. I shall never forgive myself!"

"Marcia," cried Claude, "you must be mad to talk

in this strain on your wedding-day. What on earth harm has my book done?"

"Harm? I am not thinking of the harm it has done. I am thinking of the man who wrote it. I am thinking that my soul is linked forever to the soul of a man who has blasphemed and insulted his God as you have done."

"I? Marcia, what do you mean? Surely you are not going to be mad enough to judge me by the words I make my puppets speak?"

"God forbid that I should judge you at all," she answered bitterly. "I only know that it is absolutely impossible that I can live with you. Henceforward I cannot be your wife except in name. I am well punished. I married you to save my poor old father, but I find I cannot take your side against my God."

As she said this she fell upon the floor beside the armchair in which she had been sitting before dinner and sobbed aloud. Her face was as white as the wax candles upon the mantelpiece; in her excitement her hair had fallen in a tangled mass about her shoulders and her white hands were clinging to the arm of the chair with a tenacity that made them colourless as marble. She was quite worn out and beginning to choke in a hysterical manner that frightened Claude almost out of his senses. Outside, above the rattle of the passing traffic, he could distinctly hear the roar of the sea. It reminded him of the surf upon the reef of his native island, and for a moment he was the boyish Claude de Carnyon again without a thought of an

unhappy marriage. To what a fate had his ambition brought him!

After what seemed an hour, but was in reality scarcely five minutes, Marcia rose; and standing rigidly erect before him, drew off her wedding-ring.

"By the law of England," she said, "I am your wife, but in my heart I am a stranger to you. I am going back to my father."

"Marcia," cried her husband, "I cannot allow you to talk like this. For Heaven's sake think what you are doing."

She held up her hand again.

"Hush! You mustn't say 'for Heaven's sake.' Remember, for you there is no such place. Yes, I am going back to my father to-night. There is a train in half an hour. I have sent him a telegram asking him to meet me at Victoria."

"But I will not let you go. You seem to forget that you are my wife."

"Would to God I could forget it. There might then be some chance of my being a happy woman again. Yes! I am your wife—the wife of the man who wrote that book."

She pointed a finger of scorn at the work in question as it lay spread out, just as she had thrown it, upon the table. He noticed, as if it were part and parcel of the situation, that the force with which it had been cast down had broken the binding. So was she breaking the binding of his life's volume.

"You evidently forget, Marcia, that as your husband I can compel you to live with me."

"No law can compel me against my will; or, if it can, I will not submit to it. To ask me to live with you after what I know of you through your work would be to proclaim me lower than even the poor abandoned wretches who tramp the streets. Bad as you are, you dare not try to make me that."

"I do not try to make you anything," answered Claude quietly. "Marcia, God knows, though you think I do not believe there is such a person, that you wrong me—you do, indeed. You are judging my life by my books, and you are cruelly unjust to me. I recall what I said about forcing you with the help of the law to live with me. If you wish to leave me you are free to do so, now, this moment. Some day you will discover how cruel you have been, and then it will be too late."

"I can never discover that," she answered bitterly, pointing to the book. "There is evidence against you there that will endure for all time. Now, if you will ring for a servant to carry down my trunk, I will go."

He rang the bell, and as soon as he had done so she left him and returned to her bedroom. When a servant answered it, he said quietly—

"Send some one up to carry Mrs. de Carnyon's trunk downstairs and call a cab. She has received bad news, and is compelled to return to town."

The imperturbable servant bowed and retired. When he had closed the door Claude stood leaning against the mantelpiece looking into the fire. A moment or two later Marcia re-entered the room. She carried something in her hand which she placed upon

the table. Then, turning to her husband, she said, by way of explanation—

"You gave me five sovereigns yesterday. Here they are."

"You insult me, Marcia."

"I am sorry if I am needlessly unkind," she answered. "But you must see, in my present position I cannot take your money."

"But you cannot go to town without any money."

"I have a sovereign in my purse which papa gave me," she answered. "He will meet me, and that will be amply sufficient."

"You are still bent on going, Marcia? Is there nothing I can do to prevent your taking this wilful step?"

"Nothing. Please say no more. I could never live with the man who wrote that book. It would haunt me day and night. Oh, Claude, I pray of you to repent before it is too late. God is merciful; He will forgive if you ask aright. Repent, Claude; oh, repent, I beseech you."

She knelt at his feet and held her clasped hands up to him.

"My dear Marcia," he said coldly, for he was really angry by this time, "this sort of thing is really very painful. I pray you excuse me. You tell me I have sinned against God in my work. One question on my part before you go. Do you think you are acting as He would wish you to do by leaving the husband to whom you have given yourself this day?"

"Yes," she said, rising to her feet, "I am taking

His side against sin. 'Those who are not for us are against us,' says His Holy Word, and I am for Him."

There was a knock at the door. Claude called out, "All right," and then turned to his wife.

"In that case I will not stop you. I think your cab is at the door. I will accompany you to the station, if you will allow me, lest the people in the hotel should be inclined to talk."

Without another word they left the room together and went downstairs to the cab. Ten minutes later they were at the railway station. Claude would have given her the return half of the ticket he had taken for her at Victoria, but she would not let him; so he left her at the booking-office, and went off to see that her luggage was labelled and put into the van. This done, he walked down the length of the train until he found her seated in an empty third-class carriage. She had shut the door, but on seeing him she lowered the window.

"Would it be any use my making one last appeal?" he asked.

"No! It would be useless," she answered, looking the other way. "Our marriage was wrong from the very beginning; we never loved each other, and we had no right to dream of living together. If I thought I had really encouraged you to think of me as your wife I should regret it all my life long."

"You are not to blame, Marcia," he said humbly. "Let all the blame rest upon me."

It was time for the train to start, and the porters

were already warning those upon the platform to stand back.

"Marcia, it is not too late," he cried. "Will you wreck my life as well as your own? Jump out and come back with me. I swear you shall never regret it."

She shook her head sadly, and as she did so the whistle sounded, and the train began to move out of the station. He strained his eyes towards the window where she sat, but she would not look. The train gradually drew away from the lamplight, and finally disappeared into the darkness beyond the platform end. He watched it until he could see it no longer, and then turned to go. As he did so he put his hand into his pocket, and his fingers touched his wedding-ring.

"So much for my chance of happiness in married life," he said bitterly, and strode out of the station.

On the evening of the following day he received a long and eminently characteristic letter from his father-in-law. Marcia had evidently furnished him with her reasons for the step she had taken, and it would seem that the old gentleman, not having read the work in question, was not particularly inclined to agree with her. After a short treatise, embodying the principal points of his own faith, occurred this suggestive passage:—

"Still, my dear Claude, when all is said and done, there remains this point for our consideration. Marcia is your wife, and as your wife she must be supported. Gladly as I would contrive to give her a home in the future as in the past, I feel I am hardly justified in

doing so. In fact, it is beyond my capabilities. I presume you would hardly like her to return to Great Coram Street; and yet where else can we go? That she will persist in her determination not to return to you, in spite of my arguments, I think only too likely. What, then, is to be done?"

To this Claude, who had crossed to Paris after Marcia's secession from him, hastened to reply that it was his intention to allow his wife the sum of five hundred pounds a year; and, to avoid any chance of her refusing to accept it, the amount would be paid to the Reverend Mr. Hebstone's account in any bank he might like to name. The old gentleman wrote by return of post, gratefully accepting this bounty, and suggesting that a certain business house would receive it on his behalf.

A fortnight later, when Claude had returned to London and was domiciled in the flat he had engaged prior to his marriage, there arrived a letter from Marcia herself, stating that she had only that day heard of the arrangement her father had entered into on her account, and returning what was left of the money. This she had positively forbidden her father to accept. In a postscript she stated that she would on no account communicate with him again.

Claude put the letter in the fire, the bank-notes that accompanied it into his pocket-book, went downstairs, hailed a hansom, and drove to the Shakspeare Theatre to keep an appointment with the manager. That night his play was to be presented to a London audience for the first time.

CHAPTER V

A MARTYR OF SOCIETY

It seemed to Claude when he was dressing for the theatre that night, and heard the rain splashing upon the window-pane, that he was fated to have bad weather at every crisis of his life. It had rained the day he had left Samoa, it had poured the day he reached Australia, he had landed in England in a thunderstorm, on the evening on which he had first met Marcia there was a slight shower, while the night that he had proposed to her and that terrible evening when she had left him were both wet ones. Now it was coming down in torrents on the night of the production of his first play. However, on this particular occasion it did not matter very much, as he had discovered at the box-office that morning that every reserved seat in the house had been taken, and could have been let without difficulty at least half a dozen times over. That he was nervous it would be idle to deny. His hands trembled so much as he stood before his glass that it was as much as he could do to adjust his tie. However, he was dressed at last; and having pretended to dine, went down into the hall and despatched a boy to whistle for a cab. When he

stepped into the vehicle he gave the order, "Shakspere Theatre," in a voice that he hardly recognised as his own, and was whirled away.

Half an hour later, just as the clocks in the neighbourhood were striking seven, he reached his destination and paid his cab off. By this time he was well known to every servant at the theatre, and had no need to inquire his way to the stage door. The door-keeper wished him "Good-evening and good luck"; and, in response to his inquiry, informed him that the manager had already arrived, and was to be found in his dressing-room.

"Shall I take you up, sir?" he inquired civilly.

"No, thank you," said Claude, "I can find my way. What sort of success are we going to have, do you think, to-night?"

"A thumping big one, sir," replied the man. "That's if all's true as I hear. I'm sure I wish you luck, sir!"

"Thank you, Wilkins; if your prophecy turns out a true one, I'll give you something with which to drink my health."

So saying he ran down the passage, turning up half a dozen steps on to the stage, and made his way to the manager's dressing-room, which was situated in a corridor on the prompt side.

When he had knocked he was told to enter, and in he went to find the gentleman of whom he was in search busily engaged in making himself up before a large mirror. He turned his head to see who his visitor might be, and discovering that it was Claude,

bade his dresser remove some clothes from a chair and let Mr. de Carnyon sit down.

It was a curious little den, this dressing-room, in shape almost square. Facing the door stood the making-up table, littered with grease, paints and *crêpe* hair. Above it was suspended the large mirror into which the manager had been gazing when Claude entered the room. In the centre was a small leather-topped writing-table, opposite the mirror a dwarf bookcase, and on every available inch of wall pictures and photographs of theatrical, literary, musical, or fashionable celebrities.

"Do you know the time?" said Claude, amazed to find the other so advanced in his preparations.

"Perfectly," returned the manager calmly. "If you look at the clock in front of you you will see that it has just struck seven. You are surprised to find me dressing so soon. Well, it's a habit I have. I like to be dressed and ready before the audience come into the house. Then I'm at liberty if I'm wanted for anything; besides, I have a sort of superstition that getting accustomed to my make-up helps me to a proper conception of the part I am about to play. I hope you think I carry out your idea of Prince Meckerstein?"

"You have it exactly," said Claude. "No man could have come nearer it. But oh, I wish I were not so confoundedly nervous. I'm trembling like a coward."

"A very proper feeling for a young author making his *début* before a discriminating public. Never fear; write me a few more plays like the one we're produc-

ing to-night, and I'll take it upon myself to guarantee you'll soon outgrow your nervousness. I prophesy that to-morrow you'll be the talk of the town."

"I would gladly dispense with that to have to-night over. What are you going to do?"

The actor had put down his brushes and was slipping on a light velvet coat his dresser was holding for him.

"Going to have a final look round. Will you come with me—or perhaps you would prefer to remain here?"

"I'd rather come with you," said Claude, and he followed the other out on to the stage.

Here all was confusion. Four men were busily occupied laying the painted cloth that was to represent the gravelled walk before the castle windows, and two more were placing in position the marble balustrading against which Prince Meckerstein was to lean while cynically commenting on the imperfections of our English marriage system; others were setting the wings in position, and uncovering the furniture that was to be used in the second act. All seemed busy as bees. The balance of the company were just arriving and making their ways to their various dressing-rooms, while the voices of some members of the orchestra, talking to the doorkeeper, could plainly be overheard along the dark passage.

Though it still wanted half an hour of the curtain's rising, it was evident that the pit and gallery were filling fast, and when Claude heard the sound they made on entering and realised that it was the work of his

brain they had come to criticise, he first felt a thrill of intense exultation, which was succeeded by a cold shiver of dread that made him tremble like an aspen leaf.

"Would you care to have a look at your patrons?" asked the manager, who had left for a minute to speak to the master carpenter.

Claude nodded, and was thereupon conducted to the prompt proscenium door where two holes, bored in the woodwork, permitted him an uninterrupted view of the house. It was now only a matter of ten minutes before the curtain would go up, and the pit and gallery were packed, while the stalls and boxes were decidedly well filled. The orchestra were taking their places, and while he watched the conductor assumed his chair and tapped the stand before him. Instantly the band burst into a bright melody, and the call-boy sped off to the dressing-rooms to warn the company that the music had begun.

"Now we'll go back to my room if you've no objection," said Claverson. "I come on early, as you know, and I've no time to spare. Is all ready, Jackson?"

The stage manager intimated that everything was prepared, and they set off for the dressing-room.

"Are you going in front? Or what do you intend to do?" asked the actor of the author.

"I shan't stay here at all," was the other's prompt reply. "I shall go out and amuse myself till eleven o'clock. Then I shall come back and learn my fate. If I stay here I shall be only in the way, and if I go in front I verily believe I shall die in a fit."

Both were silent again, while the manager gave a few finishing touches to his make-up and then donned the irreproachable frock-coat the Austrian Prince was to wear in the first act.

At this moment the call-boy entered again to say that it was within a minute of eight o'clock, and "Mr. Jackson would be glad to know if he should ring the curtain up."

"Tell him I am quite ready and that he can ring it as soon as he pleases. Now, Mr. Carnyon, time's up. I must be going. Let us hope for the best of good luck, and don't forget to be here at eleven. There's certain to be a call for the author, and I don't want to have to say that he has run away. That would never do, you know."

"I'll be here without fail," said Claude, with the air of a condemned man promising to be present at his own execution.

"Very well; till then, *au revoir!*"

The manager went out and he was left alone. He could just hear the braying of the trumpets in the orchestra, and every now and then the sound of some scurrying foot in the corridor outside. He waited a few moments, his heart beating like a piston-rod, and then opened the door and went out. From where he stood he could see that the curtain was up and that the popular manager was on the stage receiving an ovation. He did not look again, but seized his hat and scurried down the passage towards the box-office.

"I shall be back at eleven," he cried to the aston-

ished Wilkins, and then passed out and plunged into the darkness.

Which way he went he did not stop to think. He was only conscious that he must walk—walk—walk. As he hurried along he looked at the passers-by and wondered what they were thinking about, and if there was one among all he met who had ever undergone the same ordeal as he was passing through then.

Leaving Trafalgar Square behind him he passed down Northumberland Avenue, and presently reached the Embankment. Once there he turned citywards with the intention of walking as far as Blackfriars and then taking the Underground back to Charing Cross. He had passed under the dark arch of Waterloo Bridge, and had come opposite the Temple Railway Station when he saw a man cross the road, and after deliberating for a moment begin to climb the parapet of the Embankment. Divining his intention and without losing a moment, Claude ran forward and caught him just as he was clambering to his feet, preparatory to hurling himself over. Another second and it would have been too late. As it was the would-be suicide struggled like a maniac to get free. Claude, however, was much the stronger man, and held him in a grip of iron. Finally he dragged him down, threw him on his back upon the pavement, and stooped to look at him. To his surprise he was quite a lad, only two- or three-and-twenty at most. He was well dressed and showed unmistakable signs of being of gentle birth.

"You young idiot!" cried Claude, surveying him



"Claude . . . led him to the kerb edge and hailed the cabman."

with unutterable scorn. "What do you mean by attempting to throw yourself over like that?"

"Let me go! let me go!" cried the wretched youth, struggling to free himself. "Oh, why did you stop me? If you hadn't done so it would have been all over by this time, and I should have been free."

"Very likely; but fortunately for you I was in time. Now, look here. Either you've got to tell me why you tried to do it or I'll hand you over to the first policeman who comes along and leave him to find out. Which is it to be?"

"The police—never! I think I should try to kill you first and myself afterwards. Oh, why do you want to know? What business is it of yours if I put an end to my misery or not? I have never done you any harm, so why should you try to make me live? There is nothing but sorrow behind me and disgrace ahead. It is best that I should die and be out of it all."

"Don't be a fool. How do you know that there is only disgrace ahead? Never mind, we won't waste time talking of that now. I'm going to take you home with me."

A hansom was approaching. Claude made the wretched youth rise, led him to the kerb edge and hailed the cabman. He pulled his horse up and threw open the apron. When he had done so Claude bade the young man get in, and having seated himself beside him, gave the cabman the address to which he was to drive.

"Don't lose any more time than you can help," he said, "and there'll be an extra shilling for you at the end."

The cabby proved equal to the emergency, and very soon they were bowling down the Embankment at a rapid pace. Within twenty minutes they had reached their destination, had paid off the Jehu, and were entering the building. The lift conveyed them to the floor on which Claude resided, and when they reached the front door of Flat No. 41, he opened it with his latchkey, and bade his companion enter. Presently they were seated in the dining-room, the electric light was switched on, and the young man had been given a stiff glass of whisky and water. Then Claude spoke.

"Now," he said, "I want you to try and tell me all your trouble, and let me see if I can help you."

"I can't! I can't!" the unhappy young fellow replied, throwing his head down on to his arms upon the table, and groaning like a wounded bull. "Don't ask me. I can't bear to think of it myself."

"But you must. I want you to tell me everything, and let me see if I can help you. Take my word for it, you'll find your mind much easier when you have unburdened yourself of your trouble."

He crossed to where the young fellow sat, and placed his hand kindly upon his shoulder.

"Believe me," he said, "I shall be able to sympathise with you. I've had a lot of trouble myself lately. So I know something about it. Come along, out with it. I don't suppose it's so very bad after all."

The youth raised his tear-stained countenance and looked at his questioner. Something in the handsome face before him must have decided him, for he sat himself back in his chair and unbosomed himself to his

newly-found friend. His story was sad but an eminently simple one. His name, so Claude discovered, was Vincent Lee, and he was a medical student at St. Nicholas' Hospital in the East End. His father and mother were dead, and he had only one living relative in the world, a sister named Jessie, who was younger than himself and governess in a nobleman's family in the north of England. They had each been left five hundred pounds by their father, who had been a doctor in the Midlands, and the son's amount was to enable him to follow his sire in the profession of medicine. Fired with ambition, the youth had come to London and enrolled himself as a student of St. Nicholas'. His progress had been brilliant, and great things were prophesied for him. Unfortunately, however, he fell into a bad set, began to gamble in a small way, which was destined soon to become a bigger. His little capital vanished like snow before the noonday sun. Before very long he found himself on the verge of bankruptcy. Not knowing which way to turn, he at last appealed to his sister for help. She, with the characteristic self-sacrifice of a woman, placed her little all at his disposal. He then set himself seriously to work. A studentship, one of the best in the hospital's gift, was vacant, and for this he determined to try. The authorities noticed his talent and his assiduity, and encouraged him in his endeavours. The result seemed almost certain, when evil influences again intervened to mar his career.

He was lodging at the time in a hothouse of gambling, and his morals were perhaps a little relaxed

under the pressure of his work. At any rate, one night he was persuaded to take a hand at cards. He complied and won, played again and once more won. Then the luck changed and he lost; he ventured on another game and lost. Again and again the same luck pursued him. To recoup himself he doubled his stakes and lost again. The thought of the money he had paid away haunted him, and he tried to drown it in drink. The authorities noticed his condition and cautioned him. Again he played and again he lost. In a fit of despair, knowing that so small an amount was useless to him, he placed all that remained of his sister's money upon the board, played his hand, and lost. Drink was the only solace left—he drank, insulted one of the authorities, and next day received a letter from the Dean informing him that he had decided to remove his name from the list of competitors for the studentship, and that he had better apologise to the gentleman whom he had insulted and be very careful for the future, or he would be compelled to leave the hospital altogether. To crown it all, he that day received a letter from his sister advising him of a contemplated visit to Town. Unable to face her after what he had done, he resolved to destroy himself, and would have carried out his intention had he not been prevented by Claude.

His host heard him out to the end, and then said—

“Tell me this, young man: if you get out of this scrape, and the authorities give you another chance for the studentship, will you make the most of it?”

“My God, yes!” the wretched youth answered

hoarsely. "If they will only give me another chance, I swear I will never touch a card again. But they won't. How can they? I've been such a blackguard that they will never forgive me. And poor little Jessie! I've taken all her money and lost it. She must know, and then—— Oh, why didn't you let me die?"

A paroxysm of weeping seized him, and while it lasted, and for some minutes afterwards, further conversation was impossible. Then Claude said—

"Listen to me, Vincent Lee. I'm going to talk to you as man to man. First and foremost, my name is Claude de Carnyon, and——"

"Claude de Carnyon? Do you mean to say that you are Claude de Carnyon, the author of 'God's Microcosms'?"

"Yes, that is my book. Now pay attention to what I am going to say. Supposing I interest myself in your case, get the authorities to give you another chance for the studentship, place myself as a surety for your good behaviour, pay back to your sister on your behalf her five hundred pounds, and take you to live with me for the rest of your course, so that I may be certain of keeping you out of harm's way, will you promise, on your word of honour as a gentleman, to drop cards and drink, and go straight for the future?"

"You will do all this for me, not knowing any more about me than I have told you?"

"Yes, I am willing to show myself sufficiently trustworthy or quixotic, as you may please to call it, for that. Do you feel inclined to let me have your promise?"

"You are giving me new life—new life and new hope. Oh, you are too good—I cannot believe it. It cannot be real. For God's sake don't say you are jesting with me."

"No, I am not. I mean exactly what I say. If you will go straight and work hard, I will give you my work to fulfil my promise. You shall come and live with me for as long a time as you behave yourself, and I'll do my best to help you, as far as I can. I presume I have your promise?"

"I promise, and I thank God for your goodness to me."

"Then that's settled. My servants will give you a bedroom across the passage, which you shall occupy till we leave this place and move into some new quarters I am thinking of. Then to-morrow morning I will interview the hospital authorities, and after that, if they forgive, your future will be your own care."

Here he pulled out his watch and looked at the dial. It was just a quarter past ten. He had no time to lose if he desired to reach the theatre by eleven o'clock. This evening's adventure had been a godsend to him, for it had taken his thoughts completely away from the play then in progress, and had dispelled his nervousness as the night mist is dispelled by the rising sun.

"I'm afraid I shall have to leave you now," he said to his guest. "I am due at the theatre, where my play is being produced for the first time, at eleven. You must make yourself at home as well as you can, and if I were you I should soon go to bed. Remem-

ber, I trust you; don't let me find that trust misplaced."

"I swear you shall never do that," replied the young man, with the ring of sincerity in his voice.

Claude thereupon touched the electric bell, and when it was answered by his servant, bade him see that a bedroom was prepared for his guest, and do all in his power to make Mr. Lee comfortable. Then wishing him a good night's rest and bidding him endeavour to forget his troubles, he went downstairs, hailed a hansom, and set off for the theatre.

By the time he reached it, it only wanted a few minutes of eleven. He passed down the little side court, and after a moment's hesitation entered by the stage door. Making his way along the passage, he could see that the piece was still proceeding, and from what he could hear of the dialogue he realised that they were about half-way through the last act. While he listened the manager made his exit and came across to where he stood. Then slipping his arm through the other's, he led him to his dressing-room.

"Well, what news have you for me?" asked Claude, who was almost afraid to ask the question.

"The very best of all news," the manager replied enthusiastically. "The piece has been magnificently received. I told you it would be. Now you can go on and make your bow when the curtain falls, without any fear at all. If I know London this piece will run a year. By that time you must have another ready for me."

"You are satisfied then?"

"Wait till you see the booking that will take place as soon as the office is open to-morrow morning. Then come and ask me that question. But tell me: how have you spent your evening?"

Claude narrated his adventures, and found time to ask the other if he could help him to become acquainted with any of the hospital authorities.

"Strangely enough, that's the very thing I am in a position to do," said Claverson. "You're coming home with me to supper, aren't you? Very well then, among the two or three habitual first-nighters who make it a rule to sup with me after a first production is Fenway Manning, the Dean of St. Nicholas. He is a most worthy old fellow and a great friend of mine. It will be strange if between us we can't do something for your unhappy young friend."

"We will try, at any rate. I seem to be in luck's way to-night."

"Indeed yes. Now I must be getting back for my last entrance. Don't go away; we shall want you directly the curtain falls."

"I'll be ready, never fear."

The manager went back to the stage, and Claude followed and took up his position beside the prompter. The play was nearly at an end, and, strangely enough, since he had heard the manager's news, even though he knew he was to face that vast assemblage in a few moments, his nervousness had entirely left him.

Five minutes later the curtain was down, the actors and actresses had retired to their dressing-rooms, and the author found himself standing before the curtain,

looking up at a vast sea of faces, and bowing his acknowledgments of their vociferous applause. A more complimentary reception could hardly have been imagined; and when Claude made his way behind the curtain again he felt that his efforts had indeed been rewarded.

"Well," said the manager, patting him on the shoulder, "you certainly can't complain of the way the house has treated you, can you? A better reception I've never seen since I've had this theatre. To-morrow you'll find yourself the talk of artistic London. But who's this?"

One of the female attendants from the front of the house was approaching, carrying in her hand a slip of pasteboard, which she presented to Claude. He looked at it, and gave a little start of astonishment. It was Loie's card, with a few words scribbled on it, begging permission for herself and her husband to come behind and pay their respects to the author. He handed the card to the manager.

"Lady Loie Beckleton!" said Claverson. "Why, she was Lady Loie Fanchester, wasn't she? By all means ask her to come round. I didn't know you knew her."

The servant had disappeared by this time on her errand.

"As children we were playfellows in Samoa," answered Claude, whose heart was beating like a wheat-flail. "I have not seen her since she was fifteen."

"I knew her very well a few years ago," said Claver-

son. "And now I come to think of it I remember hearing that she had married Beckleton, the millionaire brewer, who sits in the House for Upplesborough. Four years ago she was the most beautiful girl in London and the cleverest, but awfully wild. Her trip abroad has probably improved her in that respect—though it would be hard to do so in any other. You are a lucky dog to be in her good graces, I can tell you."

"Did you know her father?"

"As well as I know you. One of the most extraordinary men I ever met. A spendthrift to his backbone. He used to keep establishments in Grosvenor Square and elsewhere that couldn't have cost him a halfpenny under twenty thousand a year. It was a short life but a merry one. Then there was a sudden flare-up, and after that nobody ever heard of him again."

As he spoke there was a sound of rustling silks upon the little staircase that led to the front of the house. A moment later a woman made her appearance through the doorway, and after glancing round the stage came towards them. Claude looked at this magnificent creature, whose movements were as graceful as a fawn's, and whose face was as lovely as any woman's well could be, and could hardly believe that this was really Loie, the tomboy who used to play with him on the beach at Apia.

CHAPTER VI

LOIE

"Loie!" cried Claude, hastening forward to greet her and taking her outstretched hand. "Can it be really possible that I am shaking hands with you again?"

"With Loie and no other, Claude," she answered, with a little laugh; and when he heard that he knew there could be no further doubt about the matter. He would have defied you to find another laugh like Loie's in the whole length and breadth of Christendom.

"Talofa alii," she cried, her eyes sparkling with delight. "Only to think of our meeting in this romantic fashion after all these years of separation! Did I not always say you would be a great man some day, Claude? And now you see the excellence of my judgment. Your play is splendid, and you thoroughly deserved the brilliant reception you received."

At that moment the manager, having finished his conversation with some celebrities who had come behind to offer their congratulations, joined the group. Loie recognised him instantly, and gave him her hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Claverson?" she said. Then with an arch glance, "I wonder if you remember me?"

"I should be better fitted to be an inmate of a luna-

tic asylum than to be manager of a fashionable theatre like the Shakspeare, if my memory were as defective as that," he answered. "I remember Lady Loie Fanchester perfectly, and now I hasten to offer my congratulations to Lady Loie Beckleton."

"Lady Loie Beckleton returns her sincere thanks," said Loie, sweeping a little curtsey. "But that reminds me I have not introduced my husband to you. Claude, you must know my husband at once."

She looked round the stage, but for a moment could not see the person she wanted. Then she discovered him talking to two gentlemen at the foot of the staircase by which they had reached the stage. When she beckoned to him he came over to her. He was a short, stout man, with a dull face, showing dark pouches under heavy eyes, was slightly bald, and boasted enormous ears which were flattened back like pancakes against his head. His ears and his millions were his principal attributes, as the caricaturists of the day were so well aware.

"Do you want me?" he asked, as he approached his wife.

"I want to present you to Mr. Claude de Carnyon," she said, with a tinge of sharpness in her tone, "and also to Mr. Claverson. Both are old friends of mine."

"I am honoured, I'm sure," said Mr. Beckleton, and shook hands with the gentlemen mentioned. Claude he congratulated on the success of his play, the manager upon his acting and the staging of it. Then after a few commonplaces, having considered that he had

done his duty, he made an excuse, and returned to his former conversation near the staircase.

"Have you been very long in England?" Claude inquired politely when they were alone once more.

"We only arrived last Monday," she answered. "Our address is — Belgrave Square, where I hope you will come and see me as soon as you can."

"I shall be delighted, I'm sure," said Claude; and as he said it for the second time, he almost wondered if it could be really the Loie he used to tease, whom he was addressing in this formal fashion. It seemed impossible.

"I am longing to know your wife," said Loie, after a moment's pause. "Is she here to-night?"

"No, she is not here," Claude answered shortly, and as he said it his face assumed a different expression. He felt a sudden and unaccountable spasm of anger with Loie for inquiring after Marcia, and at the same time with Marcia for having acted in a fashion that compelled him to give her such an answer.

Claude looked at her as she stood before him sweeping her large ostrich-feather fan to and fro, and thought there could be no doubt at all about her beauty. It was perfection in every way—the perfection of a hothouse flower. He noticed that she was taller than the ordinary run of women, and that she carried herself superbly. She was dressed in the height of fashion; her hair was raised above her head in some new style, and held in place by three diamond-tipped pins of great value; her complexion was as perfect in its dainty colouring as the petal of a rosebud

and as delicate. But her best features, and those which attracted people most to her, were her eyes: they were wonderful eyes, as lustrous as black diamonds, and looked as if they could be anything, and express anything, in the whole range of human emotion. But there were faint little lines on either side of her mouth that ought not to have been there, and to Claude they were as expressive as any words.

"Well, I shall hope very soon to have the pleasure of making Mrs. de Carnyon's acquaintance," she said, in response to his last speech. "Now, where has my husband gone? Ah, here he comes. Augustus, we really must be going. We are hindering Mr. Claverson and Mr. de Carnyon."

"May I take you to your carriage?" said Claude.

As Loie accepted his escort a thrill shot through him such as he had not experienced since that day in Apia so many years ago, when he had kissed her and wished her "goodbye" on board the mail boat that was to take her away to England. He led her down the passage past the box-office, into the street where her carriage was waiting for her, the footman standing at the open door.

"Good-night," he said, as he helped her in and tucked her dress into position.

"Good-night," she answered, "and remember I shall expect you to come and see me very soon."

"I shall be only too glad," he replied, and at that moment her husband arrived and, with a final congratulation on the success of the evening, wished Claude "good-night," and stepped in beside his wife.



“‘ Marcia,’ cried Claude, ‘ you must be mad to talk in this strain on your wedding day.’”

When the carriage had rolled away Claude went back into the theatre. So after all he had met Loie again, and on the very night that the greatest of his boyish dreams was realised. But in what a way they had met! She was married, and so was he; and, as he had reason to feel certain, neither of them to their taste.

On the stage he was informed that the manager was in his dressing-room, and thither he repaired. The room was crowded, and when he arrived he had to be introduced to a dozen different well-known personages before he was allowed to sit down. Among them was Fenway Manning, the Dean of St. Nicholas Hospital. Claude shook him warmly by the hand, and prepared to make himself as agreeable as he knew how. Claverson, as soon as he was ready, proposed, the rain having ceased, that they should walk to his chambers, where he was to entertain them at supper. This course was adopted, and they set off. Arriving there they sat down to supper; and a merry meal it was. Every one present had been struck with the cleverness of the play they had witnessed that evening, and at the end of the banquet Claude's health was drunk with much enthusiasm.

About two o'clock the party broke up and the different members, having bade their host farewell, sallied forth in search of cabs. Claude made his way to Dr. Manning's side and asked him in which direction his home lay.

"I live in Stanhope Gardens," the other replied.

"Then you are quite close to me," said Claude.

"May I have the pleasure of your company on the journey?"

"I shall be delighted. It's a fine night, so we may as well walk. What do you think?"

"I feel just in the humour. Let us be going."

Bidding the others "Good-night," they turned down Berkeley Street into Piccadilly. For the first few hundred yards they talked about the production of the play. The old gentleman had been a regular theatre-goer all his life, and, as he found early occasion to remark, he had seen every play and every actor of importance since '45. His conversation was therefore of more than ordinary interest to the young dramatist. But when they had turned into the Brompton Road, Claude thought it was about time to commence the real business of the walk.

"Dr. Manning," said he, "I'm going to be rude enough to trespass upon your good nature on our first meeting."

"And pray in what way are you going to do that, Mr. de Carnyon?" asked the other.

"Well, to put it in a few words, I'm going to intercede with you for a young fellow who is in disgrace."

The old gentleman stopped and faced his companion.

"Dear me!" he said; "and pray who may this young man be who has been fortunate enough to secure your interest?"

"His name is Lee—Vincent Lee—and he is a student of your hospital."

"Ah! I know the young man well," said the old gentleman, with a snap. "But as you appear to know

so much, perhaps I need not tell you, Mr. de Carnyon, that he is really in disgrace."

"Nobody knows that better than I do," said Claude. "But I want to know if you can find it in your heart to give him another chance. He is a clever young fellow, is he not?"

"No, he is not," said Dr. Manning abruptly. "That word does not describe him at all—he is brilliant. A young man of more promise I never came across in the whole course of my professional career. Unfortunately that fact only makes his fall the greater. Why, I tell you, sir, that that young fellow might have accomplished anything he pleased, and but for his own senseless folly he might have been a leading specialist in ten years. But he did not choose to work; he fell into a bad way of living, consorted with the wrong set, drank, gambled away his small inheritance, and finally brought his career to a conclusion by openly insulting a prominent member of the Council. What made his case more deplorable was the fact that he had entered his name for one of the best studentships in the hospital's gift, worth something like two hundred pounds a year, and tenable for three years; and not only that, but he stood a very good chance of obtaining it."

"It is a heavy indictment," said Claude, "but supposing a friend were to take that young man to live with him, in order that he might keep him out of harm's way, and supposing that friend stood surety for his good behaviour, would you feel at all inclined to give him another chance? I can assure you the poor lad is overwhelmed with remorse, and I feel sure that

if you were to stretch a point in his favour, he would do his very utmost in the future to be worthy of your consideration. I don't think, nay, I am certain, you would never regret your clemency."

"But there is the example to the other students to be considered, Mr. de Carnyon," said the Dean. "The lad has behaved abominably, and if he is let off we shall have others thinking they can follow his pernicious example without fear of punishment."

"You can soon undeceive them. Come, Dr. Manning, I pay you the compliment of feeling sure that in your heart you would like to forgive the lad. He is staying with me now, and if you will accept me, I will gladly become a surety for his future good behaviour. Will you allow me to take him home a message that he is forgiven? Let me tell you this, sir: if you give him another chance it will be the kindest act of your life, and, what's more, you'll lay me under an eternal obligation."

"If you put it like that, Mr. de Carnyon, what can I say?"

"Why, that you will do what I ask," said Claude. "Let me tell the lad that if I send him to you to-morrow you will give him another opportunity of retrieving his position. I'm sorry to have to commence our acquaintance by appealing to you in this way, but I am interested in this unfortunate young man, and I want to get him out of his scrape if I possibly can. What am I to tell him?"

"Tell him that he had better come and see me at the hospital first thing to-morrow morning. I'll give him

a smart wiggling and then send him back to his work. I'm sure he ought to be very grateful to you, Mr. de Carnyon."

"Let's hope he will be. I'm sure I'm very grateful to you for the generous way in which you have complied with my request."

"Don't mention it. Now, I think we separate here. Good-night, or rather good-morning, to you. I'm very glad to have had the pleasure of making your acquaintance. I hope we shall soon meet again."

"So do I! Good-night, and many thanks to you for your kindness."

They separated; the old gentleman to walk along the Square to his own house and Claude to pass, by way of Courtfield Gardens, to his abode.

It was nearly half-past two when he let himself in, and he was very tired. For this reason he lost no time in getting to bed. But when he was there it was a long while before he fell asleep. His brain was still under the influence of the evening's excitement. He began to think of Loie, and from her his thoughts passed on to Marcia. What would she say to his success, he wondered. He knew her well enough to feel sure that it would make no difference in their attitudes towards each other. It was possible, if she read a synopsis of the piece in the papers, that it would strengthen rather than weaken her determination to have no more to do with him.

When he awoke it was close upon eight o'clock. He sprang out of bed and rang for his shaving-water and letters. A bath freshened him up considerably, and

that important function concluded he set to work to dress, opening his correspondence as he did so. Three of his communications were letters of congratulation on his success from people who had been present at the performance, but of whom he had otherwise no knowledge. Another was from a firm of house-agents informing him that they had discovered a gentleman who would be willing to take the lease of the flat off his hands at a slightly increased rental; and the next was from the manager of a well-known theatre, stating that he would be willing to consider a play if one could be submitted to him at an early date. The last was a dainty little envelope of best hand-made paper with a tiny gold crest upon the label edge. The writing by this time was well known to him, and when he recognised it he felt the same nervous sensation which had swept over him when he had given his arm to Loie on the previous evening. He tore the envelope open and withdrew the contents. It was written from Belgrave Square, and was brief and to the point.

"DEAR CLAUDE" (it ran),—"It has just struck me that if Mrs. de Carnyon will be at home to-morrow afternoon I should very much like to call and make her acquaintance. I feel sure she will excuse my haste when it betrays such anxiety to know the wife of my old friend. Will you ask her?

"Always sincerely yours,
"LOIE BECKLETON."

Claude looked at the letter, and as he looked a frown gathered upon his face. This desire on Loie's part to know Marcia seemed to him to be totally unreason-

able. However, as it was clearly impossible that she could know her there was nothing for it but to explain how matters stood between himself and his wife. He was growing daily more and more angry with Marcia, and if she did not come to her senses very soon he felt there could never be any possibility of a reconciliation between them. Oh, how much, when he allowed himself to think of it, he regretted his senseless haste! He must have been nothing short of a madman, he told himself, ever to have imagined that a girl with a disposition such as Marcia undoubtedly possessed, could have made a man of his nature happy. They were as opposite as the poles, and Marcia was almost as cold. He finished his dressing, slipped his letters into his pocket, and then went down the passage to the dining-room. When he entered it he found Vincent Lee standing on the hearthrug before a cheerful fire, waiting for him.

"Good-morning, Lee," said Claude, heartily, as he proffered his hand.

"Good-morning, Mr. de Carnyon," answered the young man, a little shamefacedly, as he took it.

"How did you sleep?" asked Claude, looking at the other's pale face and dark eyes.

"I could not sleep at all," was his reply. "Is it likely? Oh, Mr. de Carnyon, I don't know how to thank you for your goodness to me. When I think of what I might have been by this time but for your stopping me last night, I don't know what to do with myself."

He shuddered and swept his right hand across his eyes.

"Don't think about it at all, then," said Claude. "That's the best way out of the difficulty. But see, breakfast is on the table; let us sit down to it, and while we're eating I'll tell you the news."

They sat down, Claude officiating at the tray, Lee manipulating the ham opposite him.

"In the first place," said the host, passing a cup of coffee, "I was introduced to Dr. Manning, the Dean of St. Nicholas', last night."

"Dr. Manning?" Lee cried. "Did you speak to him?"

"Yes, I did," answered Claude. "I walked home with him from Mr. Claverson's house. But you needn't look so scared. I told him nothing of—well, of what happened on the Embankment. I simply described you as a friend in whom I took a great deal of interest. I said I knew you were in trouble, and the upshot of our conversation was that I offered, if he would give you another chance, to place myself as a guarantee for your future good behaviour."

"How good you are to me!"

"Well, the long and short of it is, he at first thought it impossible that your behaviour could be passed over. But I stuck to him, and eventually he decided that you should go and see him this morning first thing; and perhaps if you express your sorrow for what you have done, he will forget and forgive. I fancy, however, you'll catch it pretty hot from him."

"I shan't mind that if he will only forgive me and let me try for that studentship again."

"Well, I think he will, and then it only remains with

yourself to decide how you get on. As I said last night, if you care to come and live with me I shall be very glad of your society." (Claude hurried a little as he saw that the young man was again about to protest his gratitude.) "You must adapt yourself to my ways as nearly as possible, and I don't doubt we shall do very well. I always breakfast at eight, and dine at seven. I presume you will lunch in the city."

"You are so good to me that I cannot thank you sufficiently."

"I don't want to be thanked. Let your deeds speak for you. Now, let's drop the subject. You will be pleased to hear that the play last night was a success."

"I have been looking at the paper. They speak of you as the dramatist London has been so long waiting for. I do congratulate you."

"Yes, it is a good thing, isn't it? But you mustn't believe all they say. You must come and see it with me some night, and judge for yourself."

The boy's sensitive face glowed with pleasure as he accepted the invitation. Taken altogether it was a handsome countenance, perhaps a little weak, but undoubtedly that of a gentleman. Claude was glad to see that he was neat and natty in his personal appearance, and that he spoke like a youth who had been brought up in good society. When the meal was finished Claude rose and Lee imitated his example.

"I suppose you will be off now. You had better arrange to-day to have your belongings transferred from your former lodgings here. In the meantime you will want some money. You mustn't be angry

with a friend for suggesting it, but I hope you will let me be your banker until things improve a little."

He walked across the room to an escritoire in the corner, and having unlocked a drawer took out his cheque-book and sat down to write. When he rose again he handed a cheque for a hundred pounds to the other.

"That will help you to pay any little outstanding debts you may have incurred," he said; "and it will also serve to keep you in pocket-money until you get the studentship. I think you said the amount you owe your sister is five hundred pounds. Is she in any immediate want of money, do you think?"

"Oh, no!"

"Well, then, if you'll give me her full name and address I will have half the amount deposited in a bank to her credit at once; the remainder shall be paid in six months. I would give you the entire amount now, but we must remember that she knows you have very little money, and if we were to return all her loan at once she might suspect something, and be uneasy."

"You are goodness itself to me! I have no right to take your money."

"Of course you have, if we are friends. And I thought I told you not to thank me. Well, write your sister's name on that piece of paper and then be off, and be sure you take the Dean's wiggling in the proper spirit. I shall expect you to dinner at seven to-night."

The lad said "goodbye" and took his departure in a very different mood to that which Claude had found him in on the previous night. When he had gone, Claude took up the papers and read the critiques on

his work. They were without exception laudatory, and when he put the last down he felt that after all his struggling and waiting he had really reached the top of the tree at last.

While the breakfast was being cleared away he smoked a meditative pipe, and as soon as this was finished made his toilet and went out for a stroll. An idea for a new play was germinating in his brain, and to enable it to take definite shape he made his walk a rather longer one than usual. It was a bright day, the streets were flooded with sunshine, and though the air was cold, it was sufficiently crisp to make walking pleasant. At the end of an hour he found himself in the Park pacing along beside the Row. The Lady's Mile contained one or two carriages, but the Row itself was almost deserted. Suddenly his attention was attracted by the sound of a horse galloping along the tan behind him. He turned to the rails to watch it go by. It was ridden by a lady, and to his surprise that lady was Loie. She did not see him at first, but as soon as she did she tried to bring her spirited horse to a standstill. This she managed to do when he had gone about fifty yards; but not before Claude had been permitted an opportunity of seeing how well she sat in her saddle and to what advantage her beautiful figure showed in a riding habit. Her groom rode to a little distance and waited for her.

"Good morning, Claude," she said merrily, as she drew up alongside the rails. "You are out very early after last night's dissipation." Then, without giving him time to speak, she continued, "Your play was

very clever, but awfully sad. Do you know, until the beginning of the third act I had a sort of uneasy conviction that I was in some way concerned in it. You did not take me for your model, I hope?"

"How can you imagine such a thing?" he answered, looking up at her and thinking, for about the hundredth time, what a really beautiful face it was. "I don't know how you can possibly see any resemblance."

"Well, we won't discuss that. It is sufficient that it is a beautiful play, and that the public appreciated it. I have heard this morning that it is impossible to get a seat for nearly three months ahead. You are a man to be envied."

"I suppose I am a lucky man, but still——"

"But still you want more. Ah! you men! Why will you always be so greedy? By the way, did you receive the letter I posted you last night? I hope your wife will be at home. I am most anxious to make her acquaintance."

Claude had been dreading this question. However, now that it had been put, it behooved him to set the matter right without delay.

"Loie," he answered, after a moment's reflection, "I have to get through rather a nasty little bit of explanation. It will be impossible for me to have the pleasure of introducing Mrs. de Carnyon to you."

"Why impossible? I hope she is not ill?"

"No, she is not ill. Only—only—well, to tell you the honest truth, my wife has left me and returned to her father. No, you needn't look at me in that startled way. I did not drink, nor did I beat her. I ought to

have explained first that she is an intensely religious woman—a Last Day Resurrectionist, if you know the sect, and when she read my book, 'God's Microcosms,' she decided that she could not reconcile it with her conscience to live with the man who wrote it. So for that reason she went home, and has since refused to have any more to do with me."

"Oh, Claude!"

"It's very sad, isn't it?"

Then for some reason, for which he was never able afterwards to forgive himself, he said—

"But it is not quite so dreadful as it seems. You see, we were not in love with each other, at any time. So that we're neither of us as heartbroken as we might have been had that been the case."

Loie's face looked troubled.

"I am so very sorry for you," she said at last, tapping the pommel of her saddle with her whip. "And yet they say, and ask us to believe, that marriages are made in heaven. Well, well, perhaps they may be, but it rather alter's one's childish notions of heaven, doesn't it? How little either of us suspected what was before us that last hot morning in Apia, did we?"

As she finished speaking, the remembrance of one circumstance connected with that eventful day flashed into her brain. She stole a glance at Claude and felt certain that he was also thinking of it. Her face flushed crimson, and her manner instantly changed.

"Well, if I cannot come and see you this afternoon," she said, "will you come and see me? I shall be at home all the afternoon, so that if you come you will

be sure to find me in. I have been painting and sculpting a good deal lately, and I should like to have your opinion on my work."

"I will come with great pleasure," Claude answered. "About four o'clock?"

"Yes, that will suit me admirably. I shall look forward to a long talk about bygone days. Till then goodbye."

She wheeled her horse and set him going towards Hyde Park Corner. A moment later she was round the bend and out of sight.

Claude watched her till he could no longer see her. Then he turned and made his way in the direction of Prince of Wales Gate, repeating what he had heard her say: "How little either of us suspected what was before us that last hot morning in Apia!"

CHAPTER VII

BELGRAVE SQUARE

That afternoon, between half-past three and four, faithful to his promise, Claude called at Mr. Beckett's house in Belgrave Square. As he stood in the massive porch and heard the front door bell echoing in the subterranean regions below the steps, he could not help contrasting his present position with the day when he landed in the Shadwell basin from Australia. Then he had not a single friend or even an acquaintance, so far as he knew, in the whole length and breadth of the land. In literature, or indeed art of any sort, he was a totally unknown quantity. Now his name was in everybody's mouth. If the numbers of copies sold and the run on them in the libraries were any criterion, there could be very few houses in the Metropolis, boasting any pretension to a taste in art, that did not contain, or had contained, at least one of his books; and in a few weeks' time there would be few people, in the West End at least, who had not witnessed his play. His study table was already littered with invitations to "At Homes," dinners, dances, and public meetings—all visible proofs of his rise in life. Four prominent firms of photographers had requested to be allowed to take his portrait, fashionable tailors and

bootmakers solicited his patronage, and a firm of hatters had informed him that they had invented a new style of headgear to which they were anxious to give the name of de Carnyon. An affable duchess requested his co-operation in a scheme for enlightening the costers of the Walworth Road and the New Cut, by means of a course of diluted Wagner, while people of all ranks, sexes, and ages, wrote offering to sell him things or imploring his photo or autograph. Already he had submitted himself to the tender mercies of three interviewers, who had commented on his furniture, his taste in dress, the colour of his eyes, and his preference for tea or coffee, as if such a thing mattered, and he was firmly resolved that nothing under the sun should ever induce him to let one inside his doors again.

The door was presently opened to him by a dignified butler. Claude asked if Lady Beckleton was at home, to which the irreproachable being before him was good enough to reply that she was, and to invite him to enter. Once inside he was relieved of his hat, coat, and umbrella by two pompous footmen, and when this had been done he was requested to follow the butler across the hall to a door on his right hand. Having crossed the threshold he found himself in a large room that was study, boudoir, and studio combined. It was magnificently furnished and filled to overflowing with *bric-à-brac* of all sorts and descriptions. He looked round for his hostess, but at first could not see her. On the butler announcing his name, however, Loie rose from the depths of an enormous chair, in which

she had been cuddled up before the fire, and came across to receive him. She was dressed in a pink tea-gown, with a quantity of filmy lace about her throat. The latter gave her a very soft and fragile appearance. She was evidently not in a good temper, for as soon as she had welcomed Claude she reseated herself and gazed into the fire with a pouting expression.

"It's very good of you to come and see me," she said at last, as if she felt she ought to make an effort to be civil. "But I expect you'll wish you hadn't when you find what a diabolical humour I'm in. I've been grumbling at and finding fault with everybody ever since I came in this morning."

Claude laughed. He saw that after all she was still the same spoilt, impetuous Loie he had known so well of old. He told her as much.

"I'm sure it's very horrid of you to say so," she answered. "You don't know what my life is. I'm just bored to death. I never was a saint, I'll admit, but to have all you want, every desire anticipated, to be continually surrounded by sober-faced servants who bow and scrape and smirk till you feel inclined to shake them, would try the temper of a Job. Bah! I'm sick of all this conventionality and nonsense. I'm sure I was much happier in Upolu, where I ran about barefooted and had only one dress to my back."

Claude thought he would try her temper again, so he said quietly—

"But what does Mr. Beckleton say to this despondency?"

"You are not aware, perhaps," she answered, "that

there are some persons whom you should not mention to me. Mr. Beckleton is one of them. I have no possible interest or concern in what he does or says. He is my husband, it is true; but I don't know that that matters. Our marriage was purely a matter of business. My father wished to return to England, but he could not do so without money. He had none of his own, and Mr. Beckleton is several times a millionaire, so they put their heads together, with the result that I was sold to the opulent brewer for a sum mutually decided upon between them as my value. There was no mention of love in the matter at all; but you may be sure when I agreed to marry him I made certain stipulations which I now compel him to observe. I am his wife, inasmuch as I introduce him to my friends, control his servants, sit at the head of his table, bear his name, and shall go to Court functions with him. In every other sense we live apart. I don't pretend to love him and I certainly do not respect him. But don't let us talk any more about him on your first visit. To think of him irritates me more than I can tell you. Let us forget that I am probably the richest married woman in England, and then you can tell me all your doings and your triumphs. You will have to be amusing, and you must excuse me if I fly out at you. I have got the fidgets, if you know what they are, and for two pins would scratch my dearest friend."

She was silent for a minute, and then, fancying she saw something in Claude's face, she began again—this time more defiantly than before.

"I suppose you are thinking that it is funny of me

to talk in this strain to you when I've been married something less than a month; possibly you think it bad form. I can't help it if you do. Why should I think or speak differently? I wasn't consulted on the subject of my marriage. My father and Mr. Beckleton between them disposed of my person and future without asking what I thought. When the latter bought my life he did not buy my mind, did he? You are thinking that I promised to love, honour, and obey him, I suppose; yes, I can see you are. Well, so I did with my lips, for the simple reason that it would have made a scene if I had refused, and as we had several royalties present, that would never have done. Before all let us observe the proprieties even if our hearts break. Besides, it was only a matter of form, and as I don't believe there is a God to listen, and if there is, and He does chance to hear, He is so taken up with other things that he wouldn't care a scrap what such an obscure person as Loie Fanchester promised or did not promise, I don't see that it matters a scrap. Oh, you can stare as much as you please, but after all you're only Claude, my old playfellow, and the author of 'God's Microcosms.' Perhaps I ought to keep silence; but then you see I never could hold my tongue. And in this case I certainly don't want to."

Claude had a speech ready, but he managed to keep it back. Beautifully scornful and wilfully unhappy as she was, he still had sufficient presence of mind to refrain from attempting to comfort her. So soon as she gave him an opportunity he asked to be permitted to see the pictures she had told him of that morning.

In an instant her humour changed and she sprang to her feet.

"Of course you shall," she cried. "I promised you you should. And I want to know what you think of them more than anything. Come along, they're in here."

As she spoke she made her way across the room towards some curtains at the further end. Suddenly she stopped and wheeled round to face him.

"How do you like my room?" she asked. Then, as usual, without giving him time to reply, she continued, "Isn't it pretty? And it's all my own design, every single bit of it. I've had it arranged since we arrived, though they all said it couldn't be done. The things were picked up here, there, and everywhere. That picture in the corner is a Gerard Dow; I found it in a slum in Paris. There's an Etty opposite that I bought from the funniest old Jew dealer you can imagine in a little shop down in the Latin Quarter; how he obtained possession of it goodness only knows. You should have seen him. He was like Vandyck's Rabbi—you know the picture I mean—but not so fat and ever so much more stately. I could have kissed him if he would have sat to me, and if he had not been so dirty and smelt so much of fried fish. Bah! My dresses reeked of him for days afterwards. That little bronze on that bracket over there came from Milan, and is supposed to be unique; that china from Florence, Dresden, and Vienna; most of the glass from Venice and Turin; that tapestry from Algiers, and that carved oak from Munich and Prague. This

drinking-cup was unearthed in Pompeii; but you mustn't ask how I obtained it. Look at the inscription on the front. You've kept up your Latin, haven't you? Of course you have. I remember so well in Upolu how you used to pore over those horrid old books when I wanted you to play with me. Now translate me the inscription."

Claude took the cup up and looked at the place touched by her little white finger.

"To the honour of the gods and the service of the fair Lydia," he read.

"Quite right; you've not forgotten, I see. I wonder who Lydia was. Sometimes I sit before that cup for hours, thinking of her. I wonder whether she married the writer of the inscription. Perhaps she did, and when they were disillusioned by Time he used to get drunk out of it and insult her. But we won't continue in this strain or I shall begin to get unhappy again. Now come here. Do you recognise this picture?"

She led him to a corner and pointed to a large frame. He found that it was one of his own works; the second he had painted in England and one that he had sold to the old dealer in the Tottenham Court Road the day he had first met Marcia. It represented a boy and a girl sitting together on a beach backed by tropical trees and bushes. The boy was reading and the girl was playing with the sand and looking with dreamy eyes across a large lagoon towards where the surf broke on rocks that sparkled in the sunshine every time the water uncovered them.

"Where did you get this?" asked Claude, when he had glanced at it.

"It was given me yesterday by a Royal Academician who fancied he traced some likeness in the girl's face to myself. Do you?"

"When you're in a good temper I think I do," said Claude, with a sudden coldness for which he could not account. "Not when you behave as you did just now. I feel that it is my duty to tell you that you ought to be ashamed of yourself."

She put her hands behind her back and made a face at him.

"Pooh!" she said. "I don't care for your scoldings. Besides, I shall talk as I please. I always did and I always shall. So there! But don't let us quarrel, Claude; you must keep your naughty little temper in subjection if you want to get on with me. I'm always in hot water for speaking my mind too plainly. But, tell me candidly, what do you think of my room?"

"I think it's delightful," Claude answered, "and I should very much like to have a companion to it. Next week I am leaving the flat where I am at present domiciled, and I've taken a funny old studio and residence combined in a little back street close by. I shall come to you for hints."

"You're going to furnish," she cried suddenly, turning and gazing at him with an eager face. "Then I shall take the worry off your hands. I simply adore furnishing, and it will give me something to occupy my mind; for though I've only been in London a week I'm tired of it already. I've got the real gift, and

you'll never regret confiding yourself to my care. Oh, this is delightful; I'm a happy woman again. But we'll have to wait till to-morrow. Where is your studio?"

"In Kemplin Street."

"Then we'll begin at once. I know the place perfectly. It's splendid; and we won't wait till to-morrow. I'm always impatient. I don't think I've ever been known to wait for anything in my life. I'll ring the bell, and have the carriage round in less time than you can count. Then we'll go down there and you shall show me the capabilities of the place."

Before Claude could stop her she had rung the bell. When it was answered by the butler she said—

"Tell them to send my brougham round without an instant's delay," and turned to Claude again.

"This is a perfect godsend to me," she said. "I shall have something to think about. Come, don't stand there, looking at me like a calf through a gate. Bustle about, pretend to be busy if you're not. Lift the lid of that box and you'll find a tape measure inside; put it in your pocket, for we shall want it. Have you a pocket-book, in which you can make notes of any ideas that may strike us? You have one? That's all right. Now I'll go and dress. You stay here—or, better still, go into the next room and look at my daubs. I won't be more than a minute getting ready. There are cigars in that drawer and cigarettes of all brands upon the tables. Help yourself."

Having done her best to ensure his comfort during her absence, she ran out of the room, leaving her guest

standing, bewildered, looking after her. He picked up a cigarette and lit it, and when he had done so drew back the curtains and passed into the adjoining room. In the splendour of its appointments it very much resembled the one he had just left. In structure, however, it was widely different. Evidently it had been specially designed for the purpose for which it was now being used. Overhead was a large skylight, and at the end opposite the curtains a large window, the bow of which contained a broad and comfortably cushioned seat. On the walls were several fine paintings, and in the centre of the room, opposite a *daïs*, a large easel upon which stood a half-finished picture.

"So she belongs to the Impressionist School, does she?" said Claude to himself, when he had walked over and glanced at the work upon which she was engaged. "She gets a good effect, by Jove! I wonder where she picked up her ideas."

In a corner near the window were a pile of canvases. He went across to them and turned those on top to the light. The first three were faces of unknown people, but when he saw the fourth he gave a little whistle of astonishment. It was a portrait of himself, evidently from memory, and he was startled at the fidelity of the likeness. In the face was all the old yearning for fame that he had once possessed, and another expression that made his heart leap up and then stand almost still. It was the look of love. He turned the canvas over to see if he could discover when the portrait had been painted, but there was no date upon it. He

looked at it for a few moments, and then put it back again with its companions. He had seen quite enough, and he was fearful of prying further lest he should discover some other skeleton which would also be better left unearthed. One thing was very certain. To have been in a position to put that look into his face, Loie must have—— But at that moment the picture of Marcia struggling for life in the wastes of North London rose before his mind's eye, so he dropped that line of reasoning and went back to the half-finished work on the easel. While he was looking at it the curtains parted and Loie entered the room. She was wrapped in furs from head to foot, and, as Claude noticed, had lost some of her former enthusiasm.

"I hope you like my cigarettes," she said, taking a little gold case from her pocket and opening it.

"Very much indeed," he answered. "I must get you to give me the name of your tobacconist."

Then, when he saw her take one from the case, place it between her own rosy lips and light it, he continued, in amazement—

"But surely, Loie, you don't smoke them?"

"My dear Claude," she replied, "for goodness' sake, don't put on that ridiculous look. Of course I smoke. Why not? Are you men to have the monopoly of all the vices? I smoke all the time I'm painting. I should drink brandies and sodas, as my husband does, if I liked cognac, which I don't, and it agreed with me, which it does not. If I like tobacco, why in the name of all that's reasonable should I not partake of

it? My dear boy, when I saw your play last night I said to myself, 'This is the man who knows his world and is tolerant and reasonable where women are concerned'; but since I've seen your stares of wonderment and heard your talk I've said to myself, 'This is the man who is not tolerant, and who does not regard women as he should do.' "

"You despise me, then?"

"No, I won't go as far as that. I don't know that I despise you any more than I despise myself. But then it seems to me I despise every one. Claude, compared with you, I'm as old as the Pyramids. I seem to have seen all the centuries go by and to be the concentrated meanness and stupidity of them all! Oh, what a mean, horrible world it is when you come to look beneath the surface, isn't it? Look at myself, for instance, and tell me if you could find a better example. I have everything the world can give except love; I've got wealth, health, youth, and beauty. No, don't laugh, I know I'm beautiful, and I'm not going to be prudish enough to pretend that I don't. But I'm not happy. If I hadn't my art and could not keep myself moving in the midst of perpetual excitement, I should go mad and probably kill myself out of sheer ennui. I hate flattery, I hate adulation, I hate servility, and yet it is my fate to live in a very hotbed of it. I go into a shop and am served by a young girl; she sees my gold, she envies me my face, my beautiful clothes, my servants, and my position; and yet perhaps that girl loves, and is loved by a good man who is saving his money to marry her. They are destined to

have a little house in Kentish Town, and to be as happy as any two people in the world could wish to be. And yet she envies me whose husband—but never mind him. My butler, who has a permanent situation as long as he can work and behaves himself, and should not know a care or trouble from week's end to week's end, envies his master, who soaks brandy all day long, and hasn't a ha'porth of pleasure with all his millions. Three nights ago a man, boasting one of the greatest names in England, if not in Europe, did us the honour of dining with us. Doubtless the little crowd who saw him alight from his carriage and mount our steps envied him for coming, and us for entertaining him. What would they have thought could they have known that his only object was to negotiate a loan with my husband, the greater part of which would be expended in satisfying the rapacious demands of a prominent member of the Parisian demi-monde? Oh, Claude, Claude, I tell you as a woman of the world, who, as you know, was once a pure-minded, honest girl, that when I see all that goes on around me in this fashionable world of ours, the striving after place and power, the sordid scheming, the infidelity of wives, the dishonourable double lives of husbands who are supposed to be miracles of chivalry, the cheating and the lying, kindness only valued for what it costs, woman's honour a commodity with a price set upon it, I feel as if I would give anything to be dead and out of it all!"

She threw herself into an easy-chair, and discovering that her cigarette had gone out during her harangue,

tossed it into the fire. As she did so, the staid butler entered.

"Your ladyship's carriage is at the door."

"Then let it go back again. I shall not go out this evening."

The man bowed without an expression on his face and left the room.

"You must forgive me, Claude," she said, her former vivacity quite gone, "but I'm down to zero again. We must put off our excursion till to-morrow morning. I couldn't look at anything to-day. Shall we say eleven o'clock? Will that suit you?"

"I shall be delighted," Claude replied. "But do you think you had better come at all? I should be immensely grateful to you, of course, for suggestions, but perhaps Mr.——"

"Hush!" she cried. "Don't say it. I know what you mean, and if such a thing were to pass your lips I could never forgive you. You have not learnt to understand me yet, I see. I'm a creature of nerves; one moment I'm up, all life and spirits, the next I'm down. Of course I'm going to help you with your rooms. It will amuse me, and I've got nothing else interesting to do this week. To-night we dine with the Duke and Duchess of Powysworth in Grosvenor Square. It is to be a quiet affair, as they are in mourning; which means that her Grace will go to sleep after dinner and snore, I shall talk Primrose League with her daughter, and Mr. Beckett will discuss investments with the old man and end by lending him a thousand pounds. To-morrow night we dine out,

and afterwards go to two dances, one in Eaton Square."

"I am asked to a dance in Eaton Square to-morrow night," said Claude. "Lady Bellington was, I think, the name. Why she asked me, as I have never met her, I can't think."

"Because you are a celebrity, Claude, and everybody wants to entertain and stare at you. Do go, and we'll meet there. Shall we say about midnight? That will be great fun—I shall look forward to it. Can you dance?"

"A little."

"Well, then you shall have a waltz with me for the sake of Auld Lang Syne. Oh, that happy island, how I should love to see it again! Do you ever find time to think of it, Claude?"

She was sitting looking up at him, her elbow on her knee and her chin in the hollow of her palm. The room by this time was almost dark, lit only by the leaping flames of the fire. She did not see how pale his face had suddenly become.

"Yes, I often think of it," he answered. "I can see it now just as it was that hot day you went away."

They were both silent for a few moments. It is probable they were thinking of the same thing. Loie was the first to speak, and then he saw that she wished to change the subject.

"You have never told me of your life since we bade each other 'goodbye'," she said.

"There is very little to tell," he answered, "but what

there is I will gladly tell you whenever you care to hear it. Now I think I must be going."

"Must you really? It is quite early. Only a quarter to five. I think the truth is you are afraid of me and think I may break out again. Well, perhaps you are right. Goodbye. I shall call at your studio in Kemplin Street to-morrow morning about eleven o'clock."

"At eleven. Goodbye."

He shook hands with her and then left the room. In the hall one of the footmen helped him on with his coat, while another presented him with his stick. The butler opened the door and shut it after him when he had descended the steps. Then he set off to walk home. For the first time in his life he had seen Loie in her own house, and he did not know what to think of the exhibition she had afforded him. There was something indescribably sad about the reflections it conjured up, and, what was more, there was a lurking demon behind them that would not be driven away, try how he would. When he reached home and let himself in he found Lee in the dining-room. There was a different look on the young fellow's face as he bade Claude "good-evening."

"Well, how have you got on to-day?" inquired the latter cheerily, seating himself in an easy-chair before the fire.

"Far better than I expected or deserved," said Lee; "thanks to your great kindness. The Dean gave me a good wiggling and then told me to be off to my work and remember how I behave myself for the future. I think this has been the happiest day of my life."

"I'm very glad to hear it. I hope it will be the beginning of a brighter time for you. Remember, I shall take as great an interest in all you do as if it were myself."

"If I were not so fond of my work that alone would make me do my best."

"There's nothing like the work one loves, is there? If only it were not for outside influences and the crookedness of Fate, how happy we should all be!"

After dinner, while Lee worked in the dining-room, Claude went to his study to employ himself on the comedy he was writing. In reality he wanted to be alone to think. He had a sort of premonition that Fate was arranging a disaster for him, and that try how he might he would not be able to steer clear of the rocks ahead.

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CHAPTER VIII

A DAY'S SHOPPING

The first grey signs of morning found Claude still at work. A large heap of manuscript lay on the floor at his side, and another was growing under his left hand. The play was more than half-finished, and if he progressed at this rate it would not be long before it was out of his hands altogether.

He rose from his chair stiff and cold, glanced into the ash-strewn fireplace, and then went across to the window and drew back the curtains. As he did so the clock upon the mantelpiece struck five. He had been writing for eight hours. He switched off the electric light, left the study, and went to his bedroom.

Undressing, he turned into bed and slept like a top until it was time to dress for breakfast. When that meal had been disposed of, and Lee had gone off to the hospital, Claude lit a pipe and sat down to peruse the morning papers. He was deep in the foreign telegrams when his servant entered to inform him that a gentleman would like to see him.

"Who is he?" asked Claude suspiciously, for he feared it might turn out to be an interviewer.

"A clergyman of the name of Hebstone, sir," the servant replied.

Claude's face underwent a change as he bade the man show him up.

"I wonder what he wants with me!" he asked himself while he was waiting. He was not to be long left in doubt, however, for a moment later Marcia's father entered the room.

"Good morning, Mr. Hebstone," said Claude politely, "I must confess this is an unexpected honour. What can I do for you?"

The old gentleman placed his hat upon the table, and took a seat beside the fire before he replied. Then he said—

"Claude, I have come to see you in order to try and discover if this—well, shall we say, this little misunderstanding between yourself and Marcia cannot be cleared up. I need not tell you how deeply it has distressed me."

Claude had no doubt at all as to the sincerity of this speech. Since Marcia had declined his allowance, the old gentleman had been obliged to put his shoulder to the wheel again, and the old life of debt and difficulty had evidently recommenced.

"I am sorry you should have been made unhappy by it," Claude replied, "but I think you will do me the justice to remember that I am not altogether to blame. Marcia chose to take an absurd view of my work, and she also refused to accept my allowance. Loth as I am to say it, on her head the blame must fall."

"You must forgive the child and bear with her," said the old gentleman. "She has strange notions

regarding these sort of things, and her will is a very powerful one. I fear she will not come in."

"Then what can we do? Of course, I could invoke the aid of the law and make her return to me; but I would not do that under any circumstances."

"No, don't do that, Claude. I fear if you did Marcia would prove more stubborn than ever. Remember, you don't know her as I do."

"What is she doing now?"

"She has started a little school for infants in the neighbourhood of the Euston Road. But the people are poor, and it hardly suffices to pay the rent."

"Then, to put it bluntly, what have you come to see me about?"

"To discover if anything can be done. Claude, when I see your name in every paper, on every hoarding and bookstall, and find you living like this in your beautiful home, surrounded by every comfort and luxury, I can hardly believe that you are the same young man who used to rent the room above us in Great Coram Street."

"Your daughter, if she were not so obstinate, might be mistress of all you see about you. But, as I say, she chose to raise absurd objections to my profession and left me of her own accord, though I did my best to dissuade her, to return to poverty. It may seem selfish to say so, but I don't see that I am to blame."

"No one is blaming you, Claude. Now, I suppose you would not feel inclined to give up your writing and take to some other sort of work. Say a good clerkship in some Government Office, or something of

that sort, which I don't doubt one of your friends could easily procure for you. In that case I think it might be possible for me to persuade Marcia to return to you."

"My dear Mr. Hebstone," said Claude, "if that is your errand, you cannot surely have supposed for an instant that you would be successful. No. When your daughter is prepared of her own accord to come back to me and express regret for having left me as she did I will take her in and forgive and forget the past. But until she does that I shall not attempt to coerce her."

"But you can have no notion what a struggle we have to make both ends meet. It is wearing her to a shadow. She is nothing like the girl she used to be."

"I am indeed sorry to hear it. If you can persuade her to allow me to resume the allowance I wished to make her, I shall be only too happy to do so."

"You could not do so without compelling me to ask her, I presume?"


"No, I could not. Remember how she behaved over the last amount I sent you."

Seeing that it was useless his staying any longer, the old gentleman rose and began to make excuses for having called. Claude cut him short by saying "Goodbye!" There was something cruel and cunning in the old fellow's face that he did not like, and he felt that the room would not be wholesome until he had got him out of it. After he had escorted him down the stairs he went back to his study to write some letters. He had a difficulty, however, in concentrat-

ing his attention. He was thinking of Marcia grinding her life away in her infant school.

By the time he had finished his correspondence and was ready to go out it was well-nigh half-past ten. If he wished to catch Loie he must lose no time. Leaving the house, he turned to the right and made his way in the direction of the street where his new residence was situated. It was a bright, fresh morning, just cold enough to make the exertion of walking pleasant. Apart from the interview with his father-in-law, he was not altogether easy in his mind: he had a sort of hazy conviction that he ought not to be going to see Loie. But he pacified himself with the assurance that it was only in the light of an old friend that he regarded her, and at the same time hurried his steps that he might not keep her waiting.

The house containing the studio, which Loie was so anxious to furnish for him, was an old one and very picturesque. It had been built early in the eighteenth century, had passed through several famous hands, and was much coveted by the artist world. It possessed a small porch in front with a room of comfortable size on either side of it. Above these two rooms were bedrooms, and at the back was the studio itself. This was a room of noble proportions, wainscoted from floor to ceiling with beautiful oak, black with age. There was a magnificent carved fireplace, big enough almost to sit in, and a fine diamond-paned window at the further end opening into a small courtyard. Claude was first at the rendezvous, and was examining the house when he heard a carriage drive up to the door. He hastened



out just in time to see Loie descend from her brougham.

At the same instant a little gutter-child, who had been performing acrobatic feats upon the railings that supported either side of the porch, turned to look at her, let go his hold, and fell backwards on to the pavement, striking his head a terrific blow and rolling over almost at her feet. She uttered a little cry and sprang back. But it was only for a second she hesitated, then, stooping, she picked the dirty little mite up in her arms and carried him into the hall. Once there she sat down on the bottom step of the stairs.

"Oh, you poor little wee thing!" she cried, as she bent over him and rocked him to and fro. "Why did you do it? What made you tumble like that? You might have killed yourself. Oh, Claude, do you think he is much hurt?"

"Let me look," said Claude, and then, kneeling down beside her, he began to examine the child. There was a big lump on the side of his head where he had struck himself, but no sign of any fracture. To have seen it, if there had been, would have been a difficult matter, for he was so coated with dirt that his skin was almost unrecognizable. After a while, however, he recovered himself a little and ceased his sobs. Loie still held him in her arms, his head nestling among her furs. When he was able to stand she put him on his feet, and taking out her purse gave him half-a-crown. At the sight of so much money the child stared at her open-mouthed, and finally left the studio, without a word of thanks, almost unable to

realise his good fortune. Loie rose and shook herself with a laugh.

"I hope that will count in my favour," she said, leading the way into the studio. "And now, Claude, wish me good morning nicely, and show me over your new possession. This will make an ideal room to paint in, and I see great possibilities in it. The wainscoting is perfect—simply perfect; and though the ceiling is dirty, it might be very much worse. Now come along and show me the other rooms."

But she did not wait to be shown. She went on ahead, and explored everything for herself. Opening the door on the left of the porch she looked in, and then turned to Claude.

"A sweet little room," she said, "wainscoted like the rest. This will be your dining-room. All Chippendale, and willow-pattern plates. Remember, I wish it, and you mustn't disobey me."

Then running across to the other door she looked into the second apartment. "This will be your own sanctum, when you want to be quiet and alone."

"I'm afraid not," he answered. "I want to set that aside for a young medical student who lives with me."

"A medical student who lives with you?" She turned and stared at him in amazement. "You have a man to live with you, and you never told me? Claude, I won't be treated in this fashion. Why does he live with you?"

"Because I take an interest in his career. He's a poor young fellow who nearly got into trouble, and I

want to have him by me so that I may keep my eye on him."

"How sweet of you! And is he clever? Is he going to be a genius and discover some new bacillus who will fight germs, and keep us alive, or whatever it is those delightful creatures do?"

"I believe he is supposed to be very clever."

"And you befriend him, and watch over him. How charming of you! You live like brothers, Damon and Pythias in a studio. Claude, you must introduce your friend to me, and I must help you with him. I love helping people when it isn't a trouble, which it generally is. But now let's talk of something else. I have told you that I am in love with your house, haven't I? Very well, then, we will now set about furnishing it."

"There are four more rooms upstairs. A bedroom for Lee and another for myself, with two others for the servants. Would you like to see them? Then there is the kitchen at the back."

"Never mind the rooms upstairs or the kitchen. You shall furnish the top rooms, and I'll do the rest. I'm all anxiety to begin. You must move in at once, remember. To-day if possible. I may be tired of the business by to-morrow, and then I don't know what you'd do, unless you wrote to the papers, and brought an action against Beckett, which is what most people seem to do when they've a grievance. Then he pays and says England is going to the dogs."

"You're in a very erratic mood this morning, Loie," said Claude.

"That reminds me of the days when we were chil-

dren, doesn't it you? Do you remember, when I told you we were going away from the island, you said, 'You've got such an imagination—and you always were such a little liar, Loie.' I do perfectly. But there, I am what I am, and I suppose I shall always be the same. I want the world to be made for me. I must always be kept at concert pitch, or I'm unbearable—just a bundle of nerves and a headache. On those days my maids wear harassed faces, and Beckleton makes excuses and dines at his club. He has learnt that in a month. But we're wasting time. We've got to find some one to scrub these floors. They must be done at once, if I've got to do them myself."

"Why must they be done at once? I see no particular hurry."

"Then you'll excuse my saying so, but you're a goose. Don't you see I must get the furniture in to-day? Of course they must be done at once. I must find a charwoman. Where shall I look? Ah! I know. There is a baker's shop at the corner. I'll inquire there. They always know everything at bakers' shops, don't they?"

Claude laughed outright, and she joined him.

"Isn't it fun?" she said. "I feel quite important. Are you coming with me, or must I go alone?"

"Of course I shall come with you," Claude replied. "But I wish you wouldn't put yourself to so much trouble. I'm not nearly ready to come in here yet."

"Then you'll have to be. I can't wait, come along."

He meekly followed her out into the street, and then

down the pavement in the direction of the baker's shop that she had remembered seeing as she drove along. Her face was flushed with excitement, her eyes sparkled, and Claude could not help seeing that she looked more than usually lovely. At the same time he could not rid himself of his uneasy feeling that this sort of thing was not quite right, that even their old friendship, that was dragged in by the heels every few moments to serve as an excuse, would hardly justify such intimacy.

Loie entered the shop confidently. A man and a woman were behind the counter. But it was the woman she chose. The man looked as heavy as one of his own Bath buns, and was probably more accustomed to the sordid details of baking than to the ins and outs of household management.

"I want a charwoman," Loie began, as if it were the business of bakers to supply these necessary helps to existence. "I saw your shop and felt sure you would be able to tell me where I could obtain one. She must be able to come at once."

"But, madam, I'm afraid I'm not in the position to assist you," said the woman.

"You mustn't say that," said Loie. "I know you can help me if you will. I want the studio—you know the one I mean, half-way down Kemplin Street on this side—cleaned at once. Surely you know a woman who could do that for me?"

"Well, I do know of one, I must say," returned the other, who had by this time fallen under the charm of Loie's manner. "But whether she's at work or not, I

can't say. I could send my little boy round to inquire, if you like, and let you know."

"That will do capitally," said Loie. "But she must come and bring her things at once. Tell her Lady Loie Beckleton wants her, and will pay her well. There's a shilling for your little boy's trouble. I shall be at the studio for half an hour."

"I'll send round at once, and then let your ladyship know. I'm much obliged to your ladyship."

"I'm very much obliged to you. I was certain you could help me. Claude, let us go back. In half an hour we shall be ready to begin business."

In less than a quarter of an hour there was a knocking at the door, and when Claude opened it in walked a charwoman carrying the implements of her trade.

"So you're able to come?" said Loie; "well, that's good. Now I want you to get to work and scrub these three rooms thoroughly, and you must be as quick as you can. I shall be back in an hour to see how you are getting on."

Then turning to Claude she signed to him to follow her out to the carriage. The footman held the door open and they got in. A few moments later they were rolling down the street behind Lady Beckleton's prize pair of Cleveland bays. To Claude there was something almost intoxicating about riding in the same carriage with this beautiful creature. The very fact of sharing the same rug with her sent a thrill through him.

"Where are we going?" he asked, as they left

Queen's Gate behind them and turned into the Cromwell Road.

"First to Baker and Hilby's in the Tottenham Court Road," replied Loie.

"But isn't that rather an expensive place?" said Claude, all his old money-saving propensities coming back to him with the mention of that sordid thoroughfare and the district surrounding it.

"It's the best place for old oak in London, and that's why we are going there," asserted Loie. "I should never feel happy about anything purchased elsewhere."

After that Claude said no more. But when he reached the shop in question, and followed Loie into it to see her buy a cabinet here, a secretaire there, chairs of all patterns and descriptions by the half-dozen, monk's benches, enormous carved chests, sideboards which looked as if they had been purloined from some baronial hall, and tables with twisted legs that seemed too good for anything but to be looked at, he wondered where such extravagance was going to stop. He tried to remonstrate, but she bade him hold his tongue and not disturb the notion she had got in her head. When she had chosen as much as she wanted she made her way towards her carriage again, Claude still following meekly behind her.

"To what address would your ladyship like these goods sent?" inquired the man who had served them, and who evidently was well acquainted with his customer.

She gave him the address of the studio, and made

the stipulation that the things were to be delivered within two hours. The man thought it impossible.

"Choose for yourself," she said, with an imperious gesture; "either deliver them in the time I gave you or I will cancel the order. Which do you prefer?"

"Your ladyship may depend we shall do our best."

"I don't ask you to do more. I may consider it settled, then. Very well. Now, Claude, come along."

She stepped into the carriage, and Claude took his place beside her. The footman stood at the door waiting for his orders.

"Acklemburg's in Regent Street," she said. Then, when they had set out, "We are going there for Persian prayer-rugs and skins. Your floors are oak, and they must be polished. It would be a sin to cover them with carpets."

On reaching the shop in question she continued her former headlong course, and when they left it again Claude was almost afraid to guess what the purchases she had made would amount to. The next place was a dealer's shop, a little lower down, for china and curios.

"Pictures," she explained, as they came out on to the pavement again, "you don't want to buy. Everybody will be only too glad to paint them for you. I will begin one to-morrow myself, and I'll make my friends contribute. Now we will go back to Kemplin Street and see how that woman is getting on."

She gave the order, and they made their way back to South Kensington. When they reached the studio

the carriage was dismissed, Loie saying she would find her way back in a hansom.

They went inside, to discover that the woman had done her best, and that the rooms were finished. They presented a vastly different appearance.

Claude pulled out his watch and looked at the time. It was half-past two.

"Half-past two?" cried Loie, "and we haven't lunched. Oh, this will never do! Can you eat buns, Claude?"

"I feel as if I could eat anything," he answered. "But why talk about buns?"

"Because I'm going off to my old friend the baker's to get some. We'll have a picnic here in the middle of this deserted studio."

He tried to persuade her to allow him to execute the errand, but in vain. She disappeared, and he was left alone. He walked up and down the studio trying to think. He seemed to be in a dream. There was only one thing about which there could be no dispute at all, and that was Loie's extraordinary charm. He had never encountered anything like it in his life before, and while it fascinated him it almost frightened him.

Five minutes later she returned, followed by a boy carrying a tray, on which was a bag of buns, a teapot, cups, milk, sugar, and a plate of bread and butter. He stood with it in his hands, not knowing where to put it.

"Place it on the floor," said Loie; and then, giving him a sixpence for his trouble, she continued, "You can come back in half an hour and fetch the things."

When he had gone she sat down beside the tray and poured out tea. Then the impromptu meal commenced.

By the time they had finished, and the boy had called for the tray again, the van had arrived with the furniture, followed half an hour later by carts with the balance of the goods ordered.

"Now we have got all our work cut out for us," said Loie. "We must arrange where the different things are to go."

All the afternoon they were kept busily occupied, and it was not until half-past five that everything was declared straight.

Loie heaved a deep sigh of relief and looked at Claude.

"What do you think of it now?" she cried, glancing round the studio.

"I think it looks splendid!" he answered. "But I must confess I tremble when I think of the cost."

"What does the cost matter if it pleases you?" she cried. "Besides, this is not going to cost you anything. It is to be my present to an old friend."

"Thank you," said Claude, with a little laugh, "but you must know as well as I do that that can never be."

"Can never be?" she cried. "And, pray, why not? If I wish it of course it will be. And I do wish it. So we'll say no more about it."

"But we must say more about it," he answered, seeing that she was really in earnest. "Loie, deeply as I appreciate your kindness, I cannot accept your gift."

"Then you must throw the things into the street.

I'm not going to take them back. Nonsense, Claude, why shouldn't you take a present from an old friend?"

"Because it would never do. What would the world think?"

She faced him with noble scorn.

"What do I care what the world thinks? I'm Loie Beckett, and that's sufficient for the world. Come, Claude, you will take my present, won't you? I shall never forgive you if you refuse."

He saw that she really meant what she said.

"I will take it on one condition," he answered.

"And what is that?"

"That you tell your husband."

"I will do that with pleasure. But I don't like the way you say it, Claude. There is something in your mind that I don't understand. Are you afraid of me? Are you afraid of being friends with me on account of what the world will say? If that is what you think, Claude, go away now, or you may regret it later on. I am not a heroine out of a novel who hesitates and simpers. I will live my life just as I please, regardless of society or anything else. If you're so careful of what the world may think, that you will not be friends with a woman you have known all your life, you need never speak to me again. I'm sure I'll not attempt to make you."

With this Parthian shot she picked up her furs and wrapped them about her. For a moment she stood looking at him with a blaze of anger in her eyes. Then she gradually subsided, and she came across to where he stood staring at her too astonished to speak.

"Forgive me, Claude," she said humbly. "You know what a villainous temper I have. I'm sorry if I have offended you. I did so want you to let me do all this for you. I forgot that you might have grown too proud to take a present from an old friend."

"I am not too proud, Loie," he answered. "And if you will forgive me I will accept it only too gladly. I was not thinking of myself when I made that stipulation, but of you."

"Then shake hands with me. You don't know how I want to be friends, Claude. You're the only one I have in all the world."

He shook her hand warmly, and then escorted her into the street. When he had found a hansom for her, and put her into it, he watched her drive away, and then returned to the studio. In the semi-darkness the furniture seemed like phantoms warning him to beware of what he was doing. But above all was a voice saying over and over again—

"You don't know how I want to be friends, Claude. You're the only one I have in all the world."

CHAPTER IX

CLAUDE TAKES A HOLIDAY

When the events to be narrated in this chapter occurred, Claude had left the flat and had been installed in the studio nearly two months. During that time he had not heard or seen anything of his wife, but to compensate for it he had seen Loie almost daily. At her desire he had purchased a horse, and on four mornings a week rode with her in the Park.

He had also, much against his wish, become a Society lion; and to make up for it, met her at almost every house he visited. His handsome face, his courtly manners, and the extraordinary quickness with which he made his jump into fame, gave him an almost unique reputation, which his acquaintance with the rich and beautiful Lady Loie Beckleton only served to heighten. A greater success than he had achieved it would be impossible to imagine. His photographs were for sale in all the principal shops and stores, his opinions were quoted in nearly every journal and magazine, while it was stated that Mudie's alone had subscribed for no less than two thousand copies of his latest book. But, while thoroughly appreciating his good fortune, Claude was far too wise to set much store upon the adulation he received. He knew only

too well that if anything should happen to him he would be forgotten in a week, and that if his power departed there would be hardly one of all his flatterers who would take the trouble to walk across the street to speak to him. At present it was supposed to be *chic* to quote his sayings, and to find a savour of genius in all he did.

That people were beginning to notice and comment upon his friendship with Loie was another thing that was becoming only too evident. He had reproached himself repeatedly for having allowed it to go so far. But, he asked himself, what was he to do? She was his oldest friend in the world, and, whatever people might say, his liking for her had never led him beyond the confines of pure friendliness. Whether he would be always able to keep himself so well in hand was quite another matter. Once or twice he had found himself standing on very uncertain ground, and had made all possible haste to get off it again. Some day he might be taken unawares, and what would the result be then? With Beckett himself he had always been on the best of terms, but of late he had begun to fancy that even he was perceptibly cooling towards him.

During the past fortnight he had been sitting to Loie for his portrait, and on the 22nd of February he was to do so for the last time. It was an Impressionist head and shoulders, and an extraordinary likeness. Loie was most keen about it, and talked of exhibiting it at the Rossetti Gallery later in the season.

When he reached the house on the date of the last

sitting he was conducted to the studio at the rear. There he found Loie on the hearthrug, playing with a fox-terrier puppy. As soon as he was announced she rose and shook hands with him.

"Do you know that it is considered very rude to keep a lady waiting?" she asked. "You promised to be here at eleven o'clock punctually, and it's now a quarter to twelve. What have you to say for yourself?"

He did not tell her that he had been spending his time wondering what sort of excuse he could invent to get away from her for a week or two. He simply stated his inability to tell her, and took with meekness the scolding she had prepared for him. She looked inexpressibly lovely in her painting blouse, and not the less so for the fragrant little cigarette nestling between her coral lips.

"Well, I suppose I must forgive you," she said resignedly, "as it's the last time you're to sit to me. Now go and take your seat on the throne and let me get to work. The light is perfect, and I want to make the most of it."

He did as he was ordered, and for some minutes she painted away in silence. Then she threw the end of her cigarette into the fire and stood, brush in hand, looking at him.

"I'm in disgrace," she said solemnly, "and in consequence things have not been going at all smoothly in this house to-day."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Claude. "What has happened? Has the chef betrayed a desire to return

to his native Paris? or has Worth made your dress for the next Drawing Room a shade too green?"

"Don't be silly, Claude," she answered. "You never seem able to be serious for a moment. You evidently don't realise the gravity of what has happened, and I'm not quite sure that I shall tell you after the way you have behaved."

"In that case I will repent of all my sins and humbly beg for pardon. What is it, Loie?"

"It's really very serious," she replied. "And I don't know what the end of it will be. You know that old cat Victoria Melbenham?"

"Yes, I have the pleasure of knowing Lady Melbenham."

"Well, you won't think it a pleasure when I've done. Prepare yourself for that. Well, the other day she called here under pretence of bothering me about one of her tiresome fads—Primrose League, Mothers' Meeting, Curates' Summer Holiday Fund, or something of the kind, but really to pry into my affairs. As I was painting at the time, filling in the background of this picture in fact, she was shown in here. Perhaps I wasn't in a very amiable humour—I don't suppose I could have been—at any rate, when she began pushing her stupid old nose—which, by the way, is so sharp that it cuts her pocket-handkerchiefs—in to every hole and corner about the place, and at last unearthed an old portrait of you, I fairly gave way.

"'Dear me!' she said, 'a portrait of Mr. de Carnyon here and another on the easel, and, as I live, the same

gentleman again as a boy—why, Loie, what a lucky girl you are to have such chances of painting a genius! I'm told even the great portrait painters can't get a sitting from him. If I were Mr. Beckleton I should really be disposed to feel quite jealous.'

" 'Mr. de Carnyon and I have known each other since we were children,' I said, keeping my temper as well as I could, but feeling that if she went on for another minute I should lose control of myself.

" 'She looked at me out of her nasty little cat's eyes and said, with an emphasis on the last word—

" 'A quite sufficient explanation for your friendship, my dear.' At that I gave way altogether.

" 'It's not intended to be an explanation at all,' I cried. 'And, what's more, if you try, in your usual fashion, Victoria Melbenham, to spread a report that there is anything more in my intercourse with Mr. de Carnyon than becomes an honest woman, I'll do what any other decent woman would do—and that is, I'll smack your face in public and call you the liar that you are. I'm not going to have you ruining me as you did poor little Emily Markworth with your cruel tongue. So remember that!'

" 'If you only could have seen her expression as I finished speaking I think you would have screamed. I very nearly did. Of course, I know what you're going to say. It wasn't a ladylike speech, and it wasn't politic. I don't care a scrap; she shouldn't have said what she did and then it wouldn't have happened. She ran out of the house there and then, popped into her carriage like a rabbit into his burrow,

and last night when we met at the Wetheringale's dance she cut me dead. Wasn't it a joke?"

"I'm afraid," said Claude seriously, "I don't exactly see where the joke comes in. Really, Loie, you are most imprudent."

"I always was," replied Loie, seating herself on the studio table and lighting another cigarette. "It was always my *rôle* to be different to other people. There are so many stiff and starchy highly moral folk in this world that it must be delightful to meet a child of nature like myself. I wish you could have seen her face—that is all. I really and truly believe she thought I was going to carry out my first threat there and then."

"You made an unjustifiable use of my name. I object to being drawn into things of this kind."

Loie's face went down to zero. Tears rose in her eyes, and, as if by magic, all the bravado disappeared. After a moment she said humbly—

"I never looked at it in that light, Claude; I really am very sorry. You see what a fool I am, after all. I always act on the impulse of the moment. What can I do? I didn't mind so much when it was only Victoria Melbenham, but when it does you harm I feel as if I could bite my tongue out. Would it be any use my writing her a note, and begging her pardon, do you think?"

"You shall never do that, Loie. No, now that it is done let it go. To do anything more would only be to make it worse. One warning, however: be very careful how you act in the future or I must go away. I cannot stay to get you into trouble."

"Go away, Claude? You can't mean that you will do that?"

Something Claude saw in her face must have frightened him, for he rose suddenly as if to leave.

"Claude," she said, in a hard and passionless voice that was quite unnatural to her, "listen to me before you say or do anything further. You know my position in the world. If you don't, I'll tell it to you. To begin with, do you know where my father is at the present moment? Of course you don't. Well, he is exiled for the second time, and this time he will never come back. His companion is the wife of his oldest and best friend. My mother has now been dead eighteen years, and when I learnt her history for the first time four years ago I could only say, 'Thank God, she is gone!' If you are a believer in heredity here is fine scope for you. For the first fifteen years of my life, as you know, I lived in squalor. The first half of the second was spent in reckless extravagance; the latter half saw us again in poverty—living from hand to mouth as best we could, on money found by our relations to keep us out of England. As if we should have dared come back to face the tradesmen we had swindled! Then a chance of returning offered itself again, and I was sold to a notorious blackguard who was anxious to purchase a position in Society. There are three ways, I may tell you, in which this can be done. First, by becoming a member of the House of Commons and putting your wealth at the disposal of your party. Mr. Beckleton did that, but he was still left out in the cold. The second is to lend money to

Royalty. This plan he also tried. But Royalty was as sharp as he, and though it took the money it would not open the gate. The last, and probably the best, is to marry a woman of title and so force your way in by making the stipulation that her friends shall recognise you. Urged on by my father, who saw a way of getting back to England, I was sold. I protested to the last minute, but in vain. Three days after I was married I discovered the real character of the man I was to call my husband. He was a liar, a profligate, a coward, and a drunkard; he had emerged from one scandal, and was on the verge of another. But whatever he was I was bound to him. Can you, with your cleverness, imagine a more hopeless position than mine? I married him and came home to England. Then my oldest friend in the world put in an appearance, and for a time I did not feel quite so lonely. When it is certain that there is a chance of my being slightly happy, scandal steps in to spoil it all for me, and my old friend talks of abandoning me to my fate. I tell you this, Claude: if you do abandon me I will kill myself. I swear that on my mother's hon—— I mean, on my word of honour."

"For Heaven's sake, Loie," cried Claude, aghast at the torrent and fierceness of the words she had poured out upon him, "try to be calm. You don't know what you're saying. Do you want to bring the house about your ears? You must be mad to talk in this fashion."

"Perhaps I am," she answered. "I have fallen low enough to be anything. So, Claude, you cannot sympathise with me, then?"

"Of course I sympathise with you from the bottom of my heart. Would to God I could help you. But I don't see what I can do. My hands are tied."

"You are thinking of your reputation, I suppose? Yes, one must be very careful of one's reputation. I fear I have never thought of mine. It's the failing of our family, you know. It's not for nothing that ours is called the wildest blood in England. I wonder if one can be born without a reputation, Claude. What do you think?" She was beginning to make a choking noise in her throat that Claude knew from experience meant trouble.

"Loie," he cried, coming across to where she stood beside the chimneypiece, and laying his hand upon her wrist, "for goodness' sake try to pull yourself together. If you don't I must go. I cannot risk a scene here."

"I shall be all right directly," she answered, "really I shall. Only, Claude, don't be angry with me. I can stand anything but that." She dropped on to the hearthrug, and leaning her head against a chair sobbed as if her heart would break.

Claude looked about him, not knowing what to do. He saw that any attempt at comfort would only make her worse, and yet to remain where he was, and risk being found by her husband, or the servants, would mean a complication that might involve him in infinite future trouble. Cold as he had made his words, it was no easy matter for him to restrain himself. His heart was beating tumultuously in his breast, and if he had followed its dictates he would have taken her in his arms and comforted her with words of love. But to

do that would be to ruin everything; and Loie was the last person in the world he desired to injure. At any cost to himself he must not let her see that he cared. When she was a little quieter he helped her to rise, and then bade her "goodbye."

"You are going away from me?" she said, between her sobs.

"I must go, Loie, and when you are calmer you will see why. Try not to be angry with me. You know very well that there is no one in the world who would do as much for you as I. Some day I will help you if I can, but in the meantime we must be very careful how we act. Remember, Loie, that both our future happinesses depend upon it."

"Happiness? What chance have I of happiness? If you want to go I suppose you must, but—but there—perhaps I had better not say what I was going to."

"I think you had better not. Goodbye, Loie; be brave, there's a good girl, and don't let us have a repetition of this scene."

"Goodbye. I am sorry to have been naughty. You will forgive me, won't you?"

It was as much as he could do to keep himself from taking her in his arms and kissing her tear-stained face.

"Of course, I forgive you," he said. "Who would not?"

"I don't want forgiveness from any one in the world but you, Claude. Oh, if only we could be young again and back in Upolu! Sometimes I have such a craving for the blue Pacific that I feel as if to stay in this hateful city another hour will kill me. Goodbye."

They shook hands, and when they had done so he went out into the hall. The butler and the footman were lolling about as usual, and he could not help wondering if it had been possible for them to overhear what had occurred in the room he had just left.

Leaving the house he set off for a long walk. It was past his lunch-time, but he did not feel as if he could touch a mouthful. In order to have time to think, he crossed the Park and tramped as far as Hampstead. It reminded him of the long walk he had on his wedding morning, and with the recollection of all that had followed that walk in his brain he made haste to think of something else.

It was nearly four o'clock by the time he reached home, a cold, cheerless afternoon, with a biting east wind whistling down the streets. Probably in Samoa the days were bright and warm, and the palms were rustling, and the surf breaking on the reef just as when he had said goodbye to the island. He began to feel that he himself was tired of London, in a measure tired even of success. Then a thought struck him. Why should he not go away for a little time? It need not be far or for very long. Things were decidedly getting too complicated in London just at present to be pleasant, and a month's absence might make an enormous difference in them. It would be a bit of a wrench saying goodbye to Loie, but all things considered, perhaps it would be better to go without doing so. In less than half an hour he had made up his mind. He would go. The next thing was to find out where to go. This was decided for him in an unex-

pected way. He had reached home, and was sitting before the studio fire toasting his feet and having afternoon tea, when his servant announced a man with whom he had of late been rather intimate. He was a young man of vast wealth, combined with a pleasant exterior, good manners, and a modicum of brains.

"Good evening, de Carnyon," he said pleasantly, as he entered. "I hope I'm not intruding, but you remember you invited me to drop in if I were passing, and look you up. I happened to be passing now, so I've come."

"Don't apologise at all, my dear fellow," said Claude. "I'm very glad to see you. I've only just this moment come in myself. May I offer you a cup of tea or a brandy and soda?"

"I should prefer a cup of tea, if I may have it. What a cosy den you've got here. I'd no idea there was such a place in the neighbourhood."

"Like all places, it has its advantages and its disadvantages."

"Too close to the main street, perhaps. Are you working as hard as ever?"

"The pity is I'm not doing enough," answered Claude. "I'm thinking of going away for a little trip; but the trouble is to know where to go. Can you help me?"

"That's the very thing I've come to do. Now, look here; I've got a little place, not much of an one, it is true, but large enough to swing a cat in, just outside Cannes. I'm going down there to-night; what you say to accompanying me? You shall do just as you like when

you're there, and they tell me the weather is simply perfect. If you'll come, there's your difficulty decided for you. What do you say?"

"Say? Why, I'll jump at the chance," cried Claude. "I'll go with you by all manner of means, and be thankful to you into the bargain. You start to-night by the eight o'clock train, I suppose? That gives us four hours to pack and have dinner."

"I'll meet you at Charing Cross, say five minutes before the hour. How will that suit you?"

"Admirably!"

"You can't think how glad I am you are able to come. The holiday will do you good."

"I hope it will. Meanwhile, Faversham, I have one favour to ask of you."

"Granted before you ask it. What is it?"

"That you keep the fact that I am going with you a secret. I want to have a really quiet time, and you don't know what a life people lead me."

"I will give you my word that I will not mention it to any living soul. Will that do for you?"

"I want nothing more. I am very much obliged to you. Must you go? Well, then, goodbye until eight o'clock. I won't keep you waiting, you may rely on that."

"Till eight, then, goodbye."

Faversham had hardly left the house before Lee entered it. He was a very different Lee to the young man whom Claude had rescued that wet night on the Embankment. He was doing admirably in his work and stood well for the studentship. The examination

was to come off the following week, and he was working night and day preparing for it. When he had changed his things he entered the studio. Claude was packing a trunk near the fire.

"You're not going away, I hope, Mr. de Carnyon," he said, on seeing the work upon which his friend was engaged.

"I'm off for a month's holiday to-night, to the south of France, Lee," Claude answered. "I'm not quite the thing, and I think a change will do me good. I'm afraid you'll be very lonely while I'm away, but you must try and rub along as best you can."

"I'm not thinking of that," the other answered, "I'm thinking how different it will seem without you. But I mustn't be selfish. I hope you will have a pleasant time."

"I'm sure I shall. And now, one word, Lee, before we go any further; I want you to bear in mind the fact that no one save yourself must know my address. I'm going for a real holiday, and I don't want to have it spoilt by any one at all. Any papers or letters which may come I shall be glad if you will send on to me at the address I give you when I write. But anything else can wait. In the meantime, if any one should call, never mind who, take care that they don't find out where I have gone. One person in particular I must warn you against."

"What is his name—and how shall I know him?"

"She is a lady; and her name is Lady Loie Beckleton. If she should call and see you, don't let her worm it out of you. I have particular reasons for ask-

ing this favour of you, and I know I can rely on your promise."

"It shall not be my fault if she finds out, I'll promise you that."

"I feel sure it won't. And now, how is the work getting on?"

"Very well, indeed, thank you. I suppose I may send you a wire directly the result is known. I should like you to be the first to hear the news if I am successful, and I also think I should like you to be the first to know if I fail."

"Of course, you must let me know at once. If you succeed you must take a holiday and get your sister to go with you, and we'll try a trip together somewhere. Now, I wonder if I've got everything in. I think I'll risk it. While I'm away remember you'll have to be your own housekeeper. Post the total of all the bills that come in on to me, and I'll send you a cheque in return."

"I'll try to be as economical as I can."

Claude stopped and slapped his knee.

"I've a brilliant notion," he said. "Look here. Why not have your sister up to stay with you for the time I'm away? You said the other day she was doing nothing just now; she'd be glad of the chance of seeing you, and she'd also manage for you and make you comfortable. Write to her to-night and ask her to come as soon as she can. What do you say?"

"That it's like your usual kindness to think of it. I'll certainly ask her."

"Go and write your letter, then, and by the time

you're ready we shall have to sit down to dinner. There's not much time to lose."

Two hours later Claude was at Charing Cross, standing at the door of a first-class carriage in the Continental train. Faversham had strolled off to buy a newspaper, and Claude and Lee were left alone together.

"There is nothing else I can do for you, I suppose, while you are away?" asked Lee.

"Nothing, I think," answered Claude. "Stay—there is one other thing which I might get you to do, if you would. There's a poor young chap coming out of prison on Friday next. His name is Burndale, and he's the son of a tailor in the Euston Road, who did me a good turn once. He got into trouble over a forged cheque, and I promised his father I would pay his passage to America when he came out. I'll send you a cheque to-morrow, and if you would receive him when he calls, you might accompany him to the steamship office and see that he takes his ticket. I should be very much obliged to you if you would."

"I will do it with great pleasure. But how kind you are to every one!"

"My dear fellow, if you keep on telling me this I shall begin to believe it. But see, time's up—and now, where's Faversham? Ah, here he is. Goodbye, old fellow, and God bless you! Look after your sister, and see that you enjoy yourselves. Take this envelope and open it when you get home. It will help you to show her the sights. Wire me directly your studentship is known, and" (here he dropped his voice to a whisper) "don't forget about Lady Beckett."

"You may be sure I won't forget," said Lee, and then the train began to move out of the station. "Goodbye, and a pleasant holiday to you."

"Now," said Claude to himself, as the express rolled over Hungerford Bridge, "I've run away—like the coward I am."

Half an hour later London was far behind them and they were speeding on their way to the sea.

CHAPTER X

LOIE PLAYS DETECTIVE

One morning, ten days later, breakfast in the studio had just been cleared away, when Loie rode up Kemplin Street and stopped at the door. On being informed that Lee was at home she went in to see him. Now, though by name Lady Loie Beckett was exceedingly well known to him, and he had often spoken of her to his sister, Lee had never up to that time set eyes on her. His astonishment, therefore, may be imagined when she was announced and entered the room. His sister Jessie, a shy little mouse with big brown eyes, came to the conclusion at once that never in her life before had she seen such an exquisite creature.

"You must be Mr. Lee, I feel sure," she began, as she crossed the room and shook hands with Vincent. "My old friend, Mr. de Carnyon, has so often spoken of you to me."

"And of you to me, Lady Beckett," answered Lee. "Won't you sit down? But first may I introduce my sister to you? She has been kind enough to pay me a little visit during Mr. de Carnyon's absence."

"So I heard," said Loie, with a fine assumption of truth, realising how Fate had played into her hands.

"And I thought I would call and find out if you would both lunch with me to-morrow. I'm going to be busy-body enough to take it upon myself to look after you while he is away. By the way, have you heard from him since he left?"

"Once or twice," said Lee guardedly, for he remembered Claude's warning.

"He seems to be enjoying himself, does he not?" said Loie, with apparent unconcern. "Don't you wish you could be with him? I think the country down there is so nice at this time of the year. Don't you?"

While she had been speaking she had taken off her gloves and was now smoothing them out on her knee with her riding-whip.

"I have never been there, I am sorry to say," said Lee, who saw her game and was resolved not to let himself be caught so easily.

"Haven't you really? Well, some day you really should do the trip," continued Loie, feeling that she had met her match in this pale, thoughtful-looking youth. Then an idea struck her, and she determined upon a bold stroke, and said, "From all accounts he had a very pleasant crossing?"

"Yes, it seems he had," said the guileless Lee, unsuspectingly.

Loie bent her head to hide a smile of exultation.

"He's out of England, then," she said to herself. "Probably he's in Paris. I wonder how I can find out. He has evidently warned this boy against letting me know his address, and if I ask him he will probably refuse to tell me."

She looked about the room, and at last her eyes fell upon the waste-paper basket near the writing-table.

"What a lovely little Cupid!" she said, crossing to the table and taking up a bronze paper-weight that lay upon it. "I have not seen this before. Do you know where Mr. de Carnyon obtained it?"

"Somewhere in Piccadilly, I fancy," said Lee, with alacrity, glad to have got her off dangerous ground at last. "But I'm afraid I can't tell you exactly where."

"I must try and find one like it. It is charming. Now I must be going. Would you mind seeing if my horse is at the door, Mr. Lee?"

Lee left the room at once, congratulating himself on his astuteness. How little he understood the sort of woman with whom he had to deal! When the door had closed upon him, she stood still for a moment admiring the bronze in her hand, but no sooner did she hear him open the front door than she dropped it as if by accident, into the waste-paper basket.

"Oh dear! oh dear!" she cried, as if in a fright, "I do hope I haven't done any harm. How careless I am! Where did it go?"

Before Jessie could reach her, she had knelt down beside the basket and was rummaging among its contents. It was not long before she found what she wanted—an envelope addressed to Lee in Claude's handwriting. It bore a French stamp, and a fairly legible postmark. Pinching it up into as small a compass as possible, she picked up the bronze and replaced it on the table.

"I should never have forgiven myself if I had broken

it," she said. "But I don't think any damage has been done. Now I must be going. What did I do with my gloves?"

She put her hand into her pocket, as if to search for the articles she wanted, and so secreted the envelope she had confiscated. Then, seeing that her gloves lay with her whip upon a chair near the door, she picked them up and turned towards Jessie Lee.

"Goodbye," she said. "I'm so glad to have found you at home. No! You really mustn't come to the door."

The girl, however, insisted; for which Loie was not sorry, as it would make her call appear more consistent to her groom, who, she had good reason to know, was a sharp fellow. On the steps she shook hands with the brother and sister.

"Goodbye," she said. "You will come and lunch with me to-morrow, won't you? Or better still, come and dine at seven o'clock, and we'll go to a theatre afterwards; that would be the better plan, perhaps. Your sister must be amused you know, Mr. Lee, and though the 'Bacteriology of Leprosy' may be interesting it is not amusing enough to be worth a trip to Town."

Lee looked at her in astonishment. He wondered how she had come to hear of his favourite hobby.

"Oh, you are puzzling yourself to know how I knew that you had made that your study?" she said, with a laugh. "Mr. de Carnyon has often spoken of you to me, and I gathered that he has been helping you in your work."

"Mr. de Carnyon knows almost as much about it as I do," said Lee. "He has mastered that subject as thoroughly as he does everything else."

"Really, we shall have to form ourselves into a de Carnyon Admiration Society, if this sort of thing goes on. Well, here is my horse. Goodbye, and remember you dine with me to-morrow evening at seven sharp. You know my house, don't you?—Belgrave Square."

"I think we shall be able to find it, thank you," said Lee.

A minute later she had disappeared round the corner, and the brother and sister had returned to the studio. When they reached it, Lee said with great relief—

"Thank goodness she didn't learn Mr. de Carnyon's address from me."

"You fenced with her splendidly," said his admiring sister. "But what a beautiful creature she is! I never saw any one so lovely. And how kind she is, Vincent! I shall be so nervous to-morrow evening. Whatever can I wear? I've only got my black satin, and even that seems too old and shabby to go to her house in."

"Wear it," said her brother, patting her plump little cheek. "We shan't expect to be swell. Besides, if she is the sort of woman I imagine her she won't notice what we've got on."

Having furnished her with this evidence of his worldly wisdom the young man donned his hat, bade his sister goodbye, and set off for the hospital.

Loie by this time had reached Belgrave Square, and immediately on arrival had gone straight to her boudoir. Then, seating herself in an easy-chair by the fire, she took from the pocket of her habit the envelope she had found in de Carnyon's waste-paper basket. The French postmark told her all she wanted to know. But, as she was very well aware, the place was only a tiny hamlet overlooking the sea a few miles from Cannes, and that there were only three villas of any importance in it, and no hotel of any sort at all. Then enlightenment came to her.

"Vivé-sur-Mer!" she said. "Why, that's where Reggie Faversham has a place. And now I come to think of it, Reggie told me last week he was going to run down there for a fortnight. He is a great friend of Claude's. I've often seen them together, and it's a million to a halfpenny they've gone in company."

For nearly half an hour she sat in deep thought, tapping the arm of her chair with her fingers and staring into the fire. Then a footstep sounded in the hall, and a moment later Beckett himself entered the room. He was not by any means the man he had been, even a few months before, when Claude had first made his acquaintance. The most casual observer could have seen that he was drinking heavily. His complexion was a peculiar sort of pinky white, his hands trembled continually, and his eyes had a shifty, uncertain look about them that told their own tale better than any words.

Loie looked at him in surprise when he entered. She had thought him in the city, occupied with one of

his interminable business engagements. He walked across and sat down by the fire.

"This is an unusual honour," she said, with a little sneer. "You don't often pay me the compliment of visiting me at this hour of the day."

"No, and that's the very reason I am here," answered Beckleton, brushing some microscopical dust off the knees of his trousers, and looking at her out of the corners of his eyes. "I've come because I want to have a talk with you. Loie, we have been married now five months, and during that time we have seen next to nothing of each other. I have a sort of hazy conviction that I have not been quite as attentive to you as I might have been. But you're always so stand-offish to me, that, 'pon my word, I'm afraid to make any overtures. I want to see if we can't be better friends in the future—more like husband and wife to each other, don't you know. We've got to live our lives together, so why shouldn't we be? I don't expect you to love me, of course; but I wish we might be a little more kindly towards each other."

Loie threw a suspicious glance at him. It was not his habit to speak of himself in this humble fashion, and she wondered if his motives were as sincere as his words were plausible. She glanced at his face, but there was nothing there to lead her to suppose that he did not mean what he said.

"I shall be only too glad to be friends with you, provided you do not expect me to be anything more," she answered coldly. Try how she would she could not prevent a feeling of disgust getting the better of her,

for the man who was by the law of the land her husband.

"Why must we be only friends, Loie?" he asked, when she had finished. "You know I love you."

"Pardon me, I do not know that. I believe it is generally understood that Miss Tottie Carysfort has the first claim upon your affections."

Beckleton rose and steadied himself against the mantelpiece.

"What do you know of her?" he asked sharply.

"A good deal more than you think," she answered calmly. "But do not let us abuse each other like a pair of costermongers. People might develop the idea that I am jealous; and I would not have that happen for the world. No, Mr. Beckleton, I will not quarrel with you, and if you really are sincere in your desire to please me I will permit you to give me proof of it. Where is the yacht at present?"

"At Plymouth."

"Very well, then, let us join her at once and set sail for the Mediterranean. I am sick of England and pining for a breath of the sea again. You can ask whom you please to accompany you, with one or two exceptions, and we'll be away a month or six weeks. Do you agree?"

"Who are you going to ask?" inquired Beckleton suspiciously.

"I have not thought of any one yet," she answered innocently. "If I do invite any woman it will be Fanny Laverstock, and I don't think you can object to her."

"By no means," said Beckleton. "I have a great admiration for her Grace."

"Then it is settled," she said. "We will start the day after to-morrow. You had better telegraph to Captain Thompson at once to say we will join her at Plymouth on Thursday afternoon."

Beckleton stood where he was by the fireplace, drumming his fingers on the marble slab and looking at her. He was still a little puzzled and a good deal more than a little suspicious.

"But why is it, Loie?" he asked at length. "I don't understand it at all."

"Understand what?"

"Why you are suddenly so anxious to go."

"Do you want the real reason? Then I'll tell you. Because I'm sick of London; sick of all my friends, sick of flattery, insincerity, and fraud, sick even of life itself. Take me away—take me out of it, and let me breathe the pure air of heaven or I shall destroy myself in sheer despair."

She dropped her head on to her hands and a moment or two later began to sob. Beckleton had seen her in a hundred different moods during their short married life, but never quite like this before. He didn't know what to make of it, and in his own way he attempted to show his sympathy.

"Steady, steady, Loie," he said. "Don't cry like that. I can't bear to hear you."

"Then, will you take me away as I ask?"

"Yes, I'll see about it at once, if you will promise not to cry any more."

She stopped and wiped her eyes. When she was almost herself again he made a little hesitating move towards her, and said timidly—

“Loie, why can’t we be something more to each other than the friends I spoke of just now?”

“Because it’s impossible. Our marriage was one of those hideous tragedies that are sometimes enacted in our social world. You bought me for the head of your house, to sit at the head of your table, to receive your friends for you, and to give you the place you wanted in Society. If I had not been Lady Loie Fanchester, and beautiful, you would not have looked twice at me. And if you had not been rich enough to pay my father’s debts and to make me enormous settlements, I should not have looked at you. Each possessing what the other required, we married—but it would be folly to think that we could expect to live happily together. No, for pity’s sake, let us have no hypocrisy. Now leave me, and see about the yacht. I will write to Fanny Laverstock, and you might perhaps ask Godfrey Belworth. If you promise him your best wines and unlimited Chateau Yquem he will come, and if he comes he will be sufficiently amusing without being vulgar.”

“I should like to ask Bertram, if you have no objection.”

“But I do object, most strongly. I won’t have the party spoilt. Bertram is a gentleman; and he detests both Fanny Laverstock and Belworth. The former would blow cigarette smoke in his face at dinner and tell him “*risqué*” stories though she is a Duchess, and

the latter would probably get drunk and want to talk Atheism to him. The former would bore him and the latter's pet hobby you must see for yourself cannot be very agreeable to a man who is still sufficiently uncivilised to believe in a God. No, Bertram is your one respectable friend; whatever you do, look to it that you keep him."

"As you will, of course. But why not ask your friend de Carnyon?"

"Because he has left Town and buried himself in the country somewhere. I don't wonder at it, seeing the way in which he has been bored and pestered by the semi-civilised mob we mix with."

"He shouldn't have become a celebrity—and you shouldn't have taken him up."

"I am the best judge of what I should do or should not do, I think. Now go and send your telegrams. Tell your butler to reserve the cabin next to mine for my maid, and above all let him see that Fanny Laverstock is not put on the same side as Belworth, he snores like a grampus and keeps her awake. When you tell him of it he insists that he doesn't, and tries to argue there's something wrong with the engines."

Beckleton promised to see that her instructions were carried out, and then bade her "goodbye" and went to his club.

CHAPTER XI

CANNES

On one fine afternoon, a fortnight later, Claude and his host had walked into Cannes on shopping thoughts intent. The supply of tobacco at the villa had run out, and until it was replenished there could be no possible thought of happiness for any one. Having made their purchases the two young men strolled along the Boulevard de la Croisette, and when they found a vacant seat, sat down to smoke and admire the view. All the afternoon Claude had been silent and preoccupied, and Faversham, surmising that he might be planning some new book, did not interrupt him. In reality he was trying to anticipate a crisis. He knew in his inmost heart that he had left London because Loie was there, and because he had discovered himself to be madly, distractedly, over head and ears in love with her. So far Honour had managed to keep the upper hand, and he had fled on finding that there was a chance of Love endeavouring to usurp the throne. Now that he had been permitted leisure to think the whole matter out, and to ascertain exactly how deeply his heart was involved, he had discovered that the result was terribly disastrous.

He struggled with the feeling with all his strength,

tried to show himself the madness of his passion, battled with it, argued with himself, and in doing so only drew his bonds the tighter. He pictured Loie as he had first seen her that night at the theatre, and the following morning on her horse in the Park. He remembered that drive to the shops in Tottenham Court Road the day she had furnished his studio for him. And as he thought of these things an irresistible craving to go back to London and tell her of his love took possession of him. A world in which he could not have Loie seemed a very desolate place to him.

As he sat on the boulevard looking across the blue sea, and listening to the rippling of the waves upon the shore, he idly watched a large steam yacht steam into the bay. She was a magnificent vessel, and made a pretty picture as she dropped her anchor and slowly swung round on the tide. Ten minutes later a boat was lowered and brought to the gangway, and a party descended the ladder, and, having taken their places in her, set out for the shore. It soon became evident that they were steaming directly for the steps just in front of where the two men were seated.

As they approached Claude stared harder at the boat. The man steering looked strangely familiar. A moment later he saw that it was Beckleton. And the lady sitting beside him was Loie.

His heart gave a leap that almost choked him, and all the blood in his body seemed to rush to his head. Was this meeting accidental, or had Loie discovered his address and arranged it? He dared not try to

think which it might be. It was sufficient that Loie was here, and that his flight from London was, after all, of no avail.

By this time the party had landed and were coming up the steps.

"By Jove, de Carnyon," said Faversham, who had been watching them, "I do believe Lady Loie Beckett and the Duchess of Laverstock are in that boat. Yes, here they are, coming up the steps. Beckett himself is behind with Belworth—and, by Jove! how bad he looks. Another attack of the old complaint, I should think."

"Do you mean by that that he is a dipsomaniac?"

"Of course. His attacks are notorious. Old Kilgovan knew it well enough when he married his daughter to him."

"The beast! It was a fiendish thing to do. But steady; they have seen us, and here they are coming towards us."

Loie and her party were approaching. She had seen the two men some minutes before, and had time to collect her thoughts and affect some surprise upon meeting them. Beckett looked sharply at his wife to see if this meeting were intentional, but she was an accomplished actress, and behaved with perfect sangfroid.

"Mr. de Carnyon and Mr. Faversham," she said, advancing and shaking hands with the two men before the rest came up, "this is a most wonderful surprise. Who would have thought of seeing you in Cannes? Why, I imagined," she continued, looking at Claude,

"that your new play was to be produced to-night at the Frivolity."

"So it is," said Claude, "but for the best of all reasons I shall not be there to see it. Surely, a poor dramatist is as much entitled to a holiday as a hard-worked lady of fashion. But how is it you are here? I thought you had no intention of leaving London for some time to come."

"I was tired of Town, and wanted a change. But here are more of your friends. Fanny, isn't it wonderful to find Mr. de Carnyon and Mr. Faversham here?"

"Very wonderful," said her Grace of Laverstock, trying to look as if she really meant what she said. "Mr. Faversham, I have a bone to pick with you. I asked you to dinner a fortnight ago, and you didn't come. I believe you ran away to escape me."

While Faversham was setting himself right with the Duchess, Claude had shaken hands with Beckleton and Lord Belworth. The former was plainly in the worst of health, his eyes were unusually bright and restless, his fingers twitched as continually as did his mouth. Belworth was a small man, suggesting a cross between a stud-groom and a family solicitor, with a shrewd little wizened-up countenance, and a habit of making faces that was rather disconcerting until one became accustomed to it. He had the reputation of being able to drink a greater quantity of mixed liquors at one sitting than any man in London, and also of being able to vault over the corner of a billiard-table—two accomplishments of which he was inordinately proud. He had been bankrupt twice, and divorced once, and

it was said he had been more than once within an ace of being warned off the Heath at Newmarket. He could be exceedingly amusing in a dry, sarcastic fashion when he pleased, and yet in spite of his own sinister reputation he had never been known to spread a report or to say an unkind thing about any one. He was notoriously impecunious, and was generally believed to be deeply in Beckett's debt.

"Where are you staying?" asked Loie of Claude, as she looked at him through the lace of her parasol.

"I am staying with Faversham," he replied, "at his villa in Vivé-sur-Mer."

"I know it well," she answered. "And now, Mr. Faversham, I am going to appeal to you. We are dying to be amused. Won't you and Mr. de Carnyon come and dine with us to-night at the Mont Doré, say eight o'clock; we are all coming ashore."

"I shall be delighted to come if de Carnyon would care to," answered Faversham, who saw how the land lay.

"It will give me great pleasure," said Claude.

"Very well, then, we'll expect you both at eight. If you forget I'll never forgive you. Come along, Fanny; we must get your cigarettes or you'll soon be fit for nothing. Goodbye."

Claude and Faversham raised their hats as the other party went up towards the town. Then, in their turn, they started on their walk home.

The dinner that night was a great success. Every one was in the highest spirits, and even Beckett, who ate nothing but drank continually, seemed to have

forgotten for the moment his usual distrust of Claude. Before parting, it was arranged that they should lunch the following day at Faversham's villa, and afterwards dine on board the yacht.

The lunch was voted charming, and when, during the repast, a telegram arrived from the manager of the Frivolity, announcing the great success achieved by Claude's new play the preceding evening, his health was drunk with great enthusiasm. On this occasion, however, Beckett was not so much at his ease. He was helped liberally to wine, and every time he emptied his glass the more certain he became that there was something suspicious in Claude's behaviour towards his wife. The latter watched him uneasily. There was the presage of disaster in his pale face and restless eyes. For this reason her manner towards Claude was marked by a conspicuous coldness, that the object of it could not at all understand. It piqued his vanity, and made him more than ever desirous of leaving. The jealous husband he either did not or would not see. Faversham, who was in a position to understand the feelings on both sides, felt as if he were smoking a cigar in a powder factory. He was not sorry when the meal came to an end, and his guests had said goodbye and returned to the yacht. He walked with them as far as the gate, and then returned to where Claude was standing on the little terrace before the drawing-room windows.

"You've been very quiet this last half-hour, de Carnyon," he said. "I hope there is nothing wrong."

"I've been thinking that I ought to be getting back

to Town to-morrow," said Claude. "There are several important bits of business that require my attention."

"I'm sorry you can't stay longer," replied Faversham quietly. "But if you can't, well, we must make the best of it. I think myself I shan't be altogether sorry to see Piccadilly again. This place is all very well for a short time, but it soon grows monotonous."

They took one or two turns up and down the terrace, and then Claude stopped and said suddenly, as if continuing a conversation—

"What a queer world it is, isn't it? The law of our enlightened country hangs for murder and imprisons for cruelty, but there is no law to protect a young girl when her father, to satisfy his own greed, desires to marry her to a beast."

Faversham was too staggered to know quite what to say. Claude savagely kicked a stone down into the road, and said—

"And what's worse, there's no remedy for the poor unfortunate girl when he succeeds."

Then, without another word, he turned and went into the house. Faversham watched him, and as he did so he whistled softly, and then said, enigmatically, to himself—

"It only wants one little spark, and then there'll be an explosion that will shake our social circle to its core. Personally I don't blame them, but at the same time I don't feel safe."

And with that candid expression of his opinion he followed his guest into the house.

CHAPTER XII

A TEMPTATION AND A SACRIFICE

The moon was just rising above the land when Claude and Faversham put off in a boat from the shore and made their way out to the yacht. The water was as smooth as a mill pond, and the little vessel, with its clear-cut outline and delicate tracery of rigging, made as pretty a picture as a man could wish to see. Away to the left, as they looked back, was the old town, nestling at the foot of its peculiar hill, and to the right and left stretched the Boulevard de la Croisette, where they had met Loie the previous afternoon. Though it was still March the evening was quite warm enough to make sitting on deck possible, so that the two men were not surprised to find their hostess there when they came alongside. Belworth was standing beside her, and as soon as he saw the shore-boat draw up at the gangway he told her, and went across to receive them.

It was the first time Claude had seen Beckleton's yacht, and he was struck with the elegance and luxury of its appointments. The owner was not on deck, and a sort of cold shudder passed over him when Loie explained that her husband was not at all well, and would not be able to join them at dinner. There was also something strange about Loie herself this even-

ing. At Faversham's lunch at midday she had been all gaiety, now she was strangely subdued and silent. Nor was Belworth himself quite as cheery as usual. The reason was soon forthcoming. After a little conversation Loie made an excuse and went below, and as soon as she had disappeared down the companion ladder he turned and walked aft with the two visitors. Faversham had noticed his unwonted quietness, and attempted to rally him upon it.

"Don't," said Belworth, with a shudder; "my nerves have gone all to pieces. By Jove! we've had a nice business here this afternoon. Ever since we left Plymouth, you know, Beckleton has been drinking like a fish, and though I pretended not to notice anything I could see that he was on the verge of the jumps. About four o'clock this afternoon, soon after we got back to the yacht from your place, Faversham, he came on deck, and after a little preliminary nonsense, started running here, there, and everywhere, swearing the devil was after him. I've seen chaps in the same condition before, but never such a sudden cold-blood exhibition as that."

"Were the ladies on deck at the time?"

"Yes, and that was the worst part of it. Little Fanny Laverstock jumped up on a hatch, and held her skirts as if there was a mouse about, screaming all the time like a good 'un."

"What did his wife do?"

"She was sitting down close to the binnacle when he first appeared, but as soon as she saw what it was she rose from her chair like a woman in one of the Greek

plays they talk so much about, and said very quietly to me, 'This is a disgusting exhibition, Lord Belworth. Do you think you could manage to persuade Mr. Beckleton to go to his cabin?' By this time poor Mr. Beckleton was hiding behind the companion hatch, and moaning like old boots, and every now and again singing out that Old Nick was getting him by the leg with redhot pincers. He talked the silliest rot imaginable about white frogs with pink eyes, and when I got him down to his berth it was as much as I could do to keep him there. Eventually I left Parman, his man, with him, and sent a note ashore to a doctor to come aboard and see him. He's pretty quiet now because he believes we've locked the Old Gentleman up in the ice-chest; but if he gets it into his head that he's escaped we shall have him trying to prance round the boat again."

"Perhaps the ladies would rather we didn't stay to dinner," said Claude, whose face was as white as a sheet—a fact which his two friends had not failed to notice.

"Oh, but they would, though," said Belworth. "I questioned 'em on the subject, and they both agreed it would cheer them up to have company."

As he spoke the gong sounded for dinner, and the men descended to the yacht's saloon, where they discovered the ladies awaiting them.

Try how they would to enliven it, the meal that evening was as dull as ditchwater. Claude, Belworth, and Faversham heroically did their best to break the spell that bound the others, but in vain. Indeed, it

was not until the coffee and cigarettes had gone round that the party in any way cheered up. Then, under the influence of the superb liqueurs and cigarettes, of which their owner was so proud, things inclined a little more towards conviviality. Her Grace of Laverstock related the adventures of some of her friends in Paris with that smartness for which she was so celebrated, and Belworth endeavoured to out-Herod her. Faversham, who was philosophically inclined, lay back in his chair and smoked, smiling when necessary, and officiating in the capacity of an audience, a little bored, but still willing to be amused. Only Claude and their hostess were silent and preoccupied. Somehow Claude could not help feeling that he was very near the one supreme crisis of his life. Loie's face was pale, and her eyes looked heavy for want of sleep. Once or twice Claude glanced across the table at the little bewigged, painted Duchess, chattering away so glibly on the other side, and could have found it in his heart to strike her. It seemed a profanation for Loie to be sitting at the same table with her.

When the cigarettes were finished and the coffee had gone round, their hostess proposed that they should visit the deck. As soon as the ladies had obtained shawls from their cabins this was done, and presently Claude found himself standing beside Loie at the taffrail. The others were laughing and chattering at the bulwark opposite the saloon companion hatch. The night was very still, and the little town ashore looked almost ghostly in the pale moonlight. While they had been at dinner another steam yacht had

entered the bay, and was now lying at anchor near them.

"Loie," cried the Duchess of Laverstock, leaving her group and coming along the deck to where the other two were standing, "Belworth and I are having a dispute. I say that is Tremorden's yacht, the *Lotus Eater*; he says it is George Cuthaven's *Sapphire Queen*. To decide the matter, will you let us have a boat so that we may go and explore?"

"Of course you can have one if you want it," answered Loie, who was not at all ill-pleased to get them out of the way. She called up the mate, who was leaning on the bulwarks near the engine-room skylight, and gave him the necessary orders. He touched his cap and went forward, while the Duchess lit another cigarette.

"Mind, Belworth," she said, when she had induced the smoke to blow in dainty clouds to her satisfaction, "if I'm right, I win ten pounds, and you pay on the nail. This is going to be a ready-money transaction."

"Ready money!" cried Belworth, with mock consternation. "Impossible! You shall have my bill. If you want cash you will take your place between my tailor and my hatter, and it won't be their turn till 1901."

"The bet is off then. Loie," said the Duchess, "I'm sorry I troubled you for the boat!"

"You'd better not quarrel, I think," said Loie solemnly. "You make admirable friends, but I really couldn't have you on board as foes. See, here is the boat. Now go away and inspect the yacht. If Bel-

worth won't take you up, Fanny, I'll bet you double the amount, with pleasure, that you're both wrong."

"Done with you," shrieked the Duchess. "Now let's be off."

The boat left the gangway and was soon pulling across the streak of moonlit water towards the shadowy yacht at anchor in the distance. Long after its occupants were out of hearing Loie remained standing where she was, motionless and silent. Claude watched her uneasily. He was dreading what he knew was coming, and yet for the life of him could not get away from or prevent. Suddenly she wheeled round upon him and took him by the wrist. Drawing him closer to her she said fiercely—

"Claude de Carnyon, fifteen years ago you used to be my friend—my true friend. What are you to-day?"

"Your friend still, Loie. Can you doubt that?"

"Yes, I doubt it very much. But I would give my soul to know that it was true. Claude, for God's sake, if there is a God, listen to me patiently to-night or you will never forgive yourself. You don't know how I am suffering. You have been told, I suppose, what is the matter with the man whom the law orders me to call my husband?"

Claude nodded.

"Of course you have. It is common property, even among the men forward, I suppose. Well, then, you can tell yourself exactly what my life is and is likely to be. Knowing how I loathed him before, you can imagine how I loathe and abhor him now. You know his character, you see to what degradation he con-

demns me. And you don't know half. He is mixed up in another awful scandal, and directly we get back to England it will come to light. My God! Claude de Carnyon, tell me how I can escape from this living death."

"Hush! hush! Loie, you must not talk so loud," said Claude in a fierce whisper. "You don't want all the ship's company to hear, do you?"

"I don't care who hears. I am desperate—desperate."

Her beautiful figure was convulsed with the vehemence of her emotion. Claude felt that if something did not happen to save him he would soon be throwing prudence to the winds.

"Loie," he said softly, "you know that I would do anything under the sun to help you, that I would count no sacrifice too great if I could only make your life happier, but what can I do?"

"You can do everything," she said, raising her white face, and looking straight at him. "It is in your power to end my misery when you will. You must be indeed blind, Claude de Carnyon, if you have not been able to see these many weeks past how madly I love you."

"Be quiet, Loie, for God's sake, be quiet. You don't know what you are saying. You must be mad to talk like this."

"Mad! Aye, of course I must be mad to imagine any one could care for me. But you cared for me once, Claude. You cared for me when we were children on the island together. You swore then that you would love me always, that you would never forget me,

and that when you became famous you would marry me. And this is the result. Here we are, together, but apart. You are famous, and I am the wife of that drunken debauchee in his berth downstairs."

She laughed scornfully, such a laugh as was destined to echo in Claude's ears like a death-knell. He did not answer, for the reason that he did not know what to say to soothe her. Every pulse in his body was throbbing fiercely, his whole being was longing to comfort her; his heart bade him take her in his arms and hold her thus against all the world. But for her sake he dared not do it. To do that, he knew, would be to ruin her body and soul, and she was Loie, the woman he loved better than all the world.

"Ah, you have no answer for me," she said, after a moment's pause, seeing that he did not speak. "I might have known that you could not have."

"I did not answer because I saw no way of comforting you," he said lamely. "What can I do or say? Don't tempt me further, Loie. I am only human."

She came a little closer to him before she spoke again.

"Say that you love me as I love you," she answered, almost under her breath. "Say that, and you will make me the happiest woman on the face of this earth. Don't you hear me tell you that I love you, that I worship you as man was never worshipped before? Claude, I could kiss the very ground you walk upon. To me you are a god—my god, my religion, my life. And is it nothing to be loved by me, Claude? Look at me, and tell me if I am beautiful or not."

She had hitherto been leaning against the bulwarks, now she stood at her full height before him, and as she moved her cloak fell back from her shoulders. Claude gazed at her and uttered a little involuntary cry of admiration. If the whole world had depended upon it he could not have kept it back. Never in her life before had the famous Lady Loie Beckleton looked so supremely beautiful. She heard his tribute and was swift to make use of it.

"See what I am!" she whispered, and there was the subtlest temptation imaginable in her voice. She paused to let her words take effect. Then changing her tone to tenderest pleading she said, "See what I am, and remember that if you will that loveliness can all be yours. Isn't it worth it, Claude? Can't you find it in your heart to love me just a little?"

He turned his head away and groaned.

"Loie!" he cried fiercely. "Hush, for God's sake. You don't know how you are tempting me."

On hearing this she came even closer, and sinking her head to a corresponding level with his, whispered—

"Love me, Claude, and you will make me the happiest woman in the world. For your sake, Claude, I will make any sacrifice known to woman."

"Give me time to think, Loie. For pity's sake, give me time to think."

"Must you, then, think before you can love me, Claude?"

But he only answered as before.

"Give me time to think."

"You shall have time," she answered. "Leave me

now, and come back to-morrow. You must be mine now, Claude; I have shown you that I love you with all my being, and you cannot say me nay. There is no one in the world for me but you."

Hitherto he had been keeping his feelings back by sheer strength of will. Now, in the face of parting, he could contain himself no longer. She was so close to him; the scent of her hair and the perfume of her laces was in his nostrils, and it intoxicated him like draughts of rarest wine. He put his arms about her. What did anything matter now? Success, Fame, and even Life itself were nothing since Loie loved him and he loved her.

"I love you, Loie," he whispered passionately. "I have always loved you. There is no other woman in the world for me but you."

He rained kisses upon her beautiful soft mouth, to which she offered no resistance. The trembling form in his arms maddened him. Prudence was thrown to the winds. Suddenly his ear caught the chirp of oars under the counter and the next moment the yacht's boat came into view and made towards the gangway.

"Let me go, dear love," she whispered, as she disengaged herself from his arms. "Come to me to-morrow. I cannot live without you now."

"I will come," he answered, and just as he spoke the Duchess of Laverstock and her two squires appeared on deck. Her Grace was prodigiously excited.

"I knew I was right," she cried to Loie. "It is the *Lotus Eater*, and I've won twenty pounds, You and

Belworth have both got to pay, or I shall distraint upon your personal belongings. We've had such a jolly row."

"I'm indeed glad, dear," said Loie, with such unaccustomed humility that the vivacious little Duchess stared at her in surprise. Then she threw a glance at Claude, and after that suggested that it was cold on deck and it would be better for all parties if they went below.

At the companion hatch Claude, who had whispered to Faversham his intention, said good-night, and the captain immediately called up the boat that was to take them ashore. On the way they spoke but little, and it was not until they had landed and were in the full glare of the gas-lamps that Faversham said suddenly, after a glance at his companion—

"My gracious, Carnyon, how ill you're looking! You're as white as a sheet."

"I'm not feeling very well," said Claude. "But I've no doubt I shall feel better in the morning."

"Well, let's find a conveyance of some sort. You'll never be able to walk home in this state."

"No, don't get a cab," said Claude. "I would far rather walk. It will do me good, I swear it will."

Faversham saw that he was in earnest, so did not press the matter further, and they accordingly set off. It was long after midnight by the time they reached the villa, and when they did they passed directly into the dining-room, where spirits were placed upon the table. The smart walk out from the town had given Claude a somewhat better colour, but he still looked

like a corpse. Faversham poured him out a stiff glass of brandy and made him drink it neat. He gulped it down, and then bidding his host unceremoniously "good-night," went to his room. Once there he threw himself down on a chair and resigned himself to his thoughts. The world seemed to be racing round and round him, and he hardly knew whether he was on his head or his heels. He had heard at last from Loie's own lips that she loved him, and he had also told her of his passion. The Rubicon was passed, but he had still a conscience left, and that conscience was now putting forth all its strength in one last appeal. He insisted to himself that he had only behaved as he had for the sake of pacifying Loie. But in his inmost heart he knew that such was not the case. His conscience told him as plainly as any words could speak that he was only using Beckett's outbreak as an excuse for appropriating his wife, and desperate as he was, his honour recoiled at the suggestion. He rose from his chair and began to pace the room. What was to be done? He had pledged himself, and to go back would be almost the action of a coward, and yet to go forward would be to prove himself worse. That he loved Loie with his whole heart and soul there could now be no sort of doubt, and he was going to prove it by— But he dared not let himself think of what he was going to do.

Hour after hour he paced the room. When the first grey signs of dawn made their appearance in the sky he was still tramping and thinking. He glanced at his Gladstone, and remembered the occasion for which he

had bought it. With that a remembrance of Marcia, his wife, came into his mind. He had had no time lately to think of her. Now her pale, sad face seemed to be gazing reproachfully at him. He stopped in his walk and leaned against the mantelpiece. This was the bitterest hour of his life, and he was well aware of it. He had to choose between his honour and his love. If only there were some one in the world to whom he could apply for help—some person who would protect him against himself! But there seemed to be no one, search how he would. Then an inspiration came to him. What if he sacrificed his love and placed himself beyond the reach of Loie! Perhaps then she would learn in time to forget him. At any rate it would save her soul. Yes, that was the one chance left to him. He would sneak back to England and appeal to Marcia, make any sacrifice in order to induce her to take him back. His life would thenceforward be Hell, nothing could prevent that, but he would have saved Loie's soul, and probably his own. He would begin a new life, forget his ambition, and thus save the honour of the woman he loved. He sat down at the table by the window, and, having unlocked his despatch-box, took out some notepaper and prepared to write a letter. It was only a matter of half a dozen lines, but it took him an hour. When it was finished he set to work, packed his bag and then crossed the passage to Faversham's room. Three hours later they were both on their way back to England, and Loie was lying in a dead faint in her cabin on board the yacht.

CHAPTER XIII

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARCIA

It was with a heart from which every spark of life seemed to have been taken that Claude sat in the Nice express as it sped across France. With the warmth and brightness of the South he was leaving behind him all that made life worth the living. He had made his sacrifice for the sake of the honour of the woman he loved best in the world, and now his future could only be likened to a living death.

When they reached Calais the sky was still cloudless, and the sea almost smooth. Across the strait they could clearly define the cliffs of Dover. Claude looked at them, and thought of the hundreds of men to whom that white line had meant peace and safety. To him it could at best mean only despair. So far he had hardly realised what he was doing. With Loie he was giving up his career, his fame, and his fortune. If Marcia would take him back no other way, he would be anything she might wish: an usher in a school again, a clerk, it would not matter what. As her husband it did not seem possible to him that Loie could ever allow herself to think of him again. But would Marcia take him back? If not he must leave England, never to return.

Nearer and nearer the little steamer approached the English coast. Already the houses of Dover were to be seen ahead. Faversham was busily engaged collecting his impedimenta, and to have something to do Claude went along the deck and assisted him.

When they were in the train and nearing London, Faversham spoke his mind.

"Look here, de Carnyon," he said, "I don't like the look of your face at all. I don't want to be inquisitive, but I can't stand seeing you as you are and hold my tongue. Tell me my interference is impertinent if you don't like it, and I'll not bother you any more; but if I can help you, you know very well I'll go to a lot of trouble to do it, don't you?"

"It's very good of you," answered Claude, looking out of the window. "But I'm afraid in this matter you can do nothing for me. I'm a bit worried about a certain matter, it is true, but I don't doubt it will all come right in time."

"In the meantime you'll be making yourself seriously ill; oh, don't say you won't, I know better. You've been fretting yourself into a shadow this fortnight past, and I've had to stand by and see it. I can't do so any longer. Look here, old man, I don't want to rile you, but I think I know your trouble. Why not go away with me? Let's run down to South Africa and shoot big game for a few months. I should enjoy it, and I believe you would when once you got away. What do you say to the motion?"

"I like it," said Claude. "But I fear it's impossible."

"Will you take two or three days to think it over?"

To satisfy him Claude agreed to do so, and then they were both silent again.

To Faversham the whole thing seemed as clear as daylight. He remembered that Loie and de Carnyon had been left alone on the deck of the yacht the evening they had dined on board, and that directly the boating party returned, the other had expressed a desire to go ashore. He remembered the ashen pallor of his face when they reached the villa, and the way he had tossed off the glass of brandy he had poured out for him. Claude's sudden resolve to return to England on the day they had resolved to extend their stay a fortnight had struck him as peculiar at the time—now it only seemed to fit in with all the other symptoms. Being a man of the world, he put his own construction on the matter, and came to the conclusion that Claude had made his love known to Loie, and that she had given him his *congé*. How little he guessed the truth!

On arriving at Charing Cross they alighted, and followed their luggage towards the cab rank. Having reached it they stopped and faced each other.

"Well, Faversham," said Claude, "I'm in your debt for a most charming holiday. I cannot thank you sufficiently for all your kindness."

"Nonsense, my dear fellow," replied Faversham. "The boot is quite on the other foot. However, don't let's part like this. Come along to the club with me and have lunch. We shall hear all the news of the Town there, be able to talk over our trip to the South,

and then you can go off and do whatever business you want to after."

"Impossible!" said Claude. "My business must be attended to at once. However, I may possibly see you this evening. Goodbye, and ever so many thanks."

"Goodbye, old chap," answered Faversham. "I wish I could see your face a little brighter before you go."

"What! Is my face as bad as all that?" said Claude, with a smile. "Never mind, it will be all right again when I have had my chat with Claverson."

Faversham got into his cab and took his seat, muttering to himself, "— Claverson. He can't bluff me that that's the reason."

From the station Claude drove direct to the studio in South Kensington. He was dreading something he might find there. On reaching it he jumped out and opened the door. No one was in the dining-room, so he passed into the studio itself. There he was more successful, for he found a girl sitting before the fire with a book in her lap. On hearing some one enter she rose and turned towards the door. Then she saw, standing before her, a man whom she will always declare to have been the handsomest she had ever seen in her life. He advanced towards her holding out his hand. "Since there is no one to introduce me," the new arrival said, "I must perform the ceremony for myself. You should be Miss Jessie Lee. I am your brother's friend, Claude de Carnyon."

Even before he spoke she was certain of his identity. She knew him from her brother's description. She

held out her hand timidly, and bade him welcome home.

"You have come quite unexpectedly," she said. "Vincent was only wondering last night when he should hear from you. He went out about half an hour ago to send you a telegram telling you of his success in the studentship. He only knew this morning."

"I did not receive it, of course," answered Claude. "I left Cannes yesterday. Do you mean that he has come out on top? Well, that is something like good news. Sit down, please, and tell me all about it. You know that no one rejoices at his success more thoroughly than I do."

As he said this the little grey-eyed woman in the black stuff gown looked at him as if he were a god come down to earth.

"I am aware," she answered, with an old-world air that sat becomingly upon her, "that there is no one in the world to whom my brother owes so much as to you. And I think you know how deeply grateful he is. He came home an hour ago wild with excitement, and the first thing he said after he had told me was that he owed his success to your encouragement and help."

"I'm afraid he gives me more credit than I deserve, Miss Lee," said Claude. "But still it is nice to know that one has done a good turn for somebody. Now I must be going out again about my business. By the way, are there any letters or telegrams for me?"

He put the question with almost a tremor in his voice. He was afraid of receiving an answer in the

affirmative. In response, Jessie Lee crossed the room to the writing-table and took up three letters and a telegram.

"These came this morning," she said. "The telegram only a few minutes before you arrived."

He put the letters in his pocket and then opened the telegram. It was, as he expected, from Cannes, and was signed "Loie." It contained only these three words, "Was it fair?"

He tore the thin paper into a hundred shreds and threw them into the waste-paper basket. As he did so it seemed to him that he was on the yacht's deck once more, hearing Loie pleading to him. Had he acted fairly? He hoped he had. God knew he had surrendered what was more to him than his life to do so.

Jessie Lee watched him out of the corner of her eye, and seeing that he was upset by some news, stole quietly from the room. He stood for a few minutes looking out of the window into the courtyard, then, putting on his great-coat again, he took his hat and prepared to set off about his business. In the hall he met the girl. He asked her if she were comfortable, and hoped that she would prolong her visit to its utmost capacity. Then, telling her that he hoped to be home to dinner in the evening, and bidding her tell her brother how sincerely he congratulated him, he left her and passed out into the street.

Having hailed a hansom, he told the driver to take him to Great Coram Street. During his ride through the well-remembered streets he thought of the days when he had tramped them as an unknown man.

Now he was one of the leading dramatists and novelists of the day. He looked out of the window as he was passing a hoarding on which four posters proclaimed his name. Three of his plays were being acted in London at one and the same time, while his books were selling by tens of thousands. One thing was very certain: he was not nearly as happy now as when he had trudged along dreaming dreams of what the future had in store for him. He had realised his ambitions, only to find them Dead Sea fruit. To-day he was going to begin a new life, and to sacrifice himself to save a woman's honour.

When the cab pulled up in the old familiar street he ran up the steps of the house in which he had once lodged and rang the bell. He had hardly done so before a maid appeared to answer it. He had never seen her before, nor she him.

"Good morning," he began politely. "Will you be kind enough to tell me if Mr. Hebstone resides here?"

"Yes, sir, he do," replied the maid, "but he's not in just now."

Claude gave a little sigh of relief.

"Is Mrs. de Carnyon at home?"

"No, sir, she's round at the school. She don't come home till one o'clock, and not always then, sir."

"And perhaps you can tell me where the school is? I wish to see Mrs. de Carnyon at once on important business."

"Yes, sir, I can tell you. Do you know Chesapeake Street, sir?"

"Yes, I know it."

"Then, sir, if you go down Chesapeake Street and take the first turning to the left you will see it straight in front of you. There's a board over the door, and you can't miss it."

Claude gave the maid a shilling, and returned to his cab. As the driver knew the street in question, there was no necessity to give him instructions, so they accordingly rattled off. In something under ten minutes they reached the thoroughfare in question, and proceeded down it in search of the lane to which they had been directed. This found, Claude told the man to wait for him, and got out. As he passed down the narrow alley and looked about him for the sign of which the maid had spoken, he felt like a criminal going to execution. Presently he discovered it, and from it obtained the information that the house within was a seminary for the education of the children of respectable tradesmen. In reply to his knock, a girl about sixteen appeared and asked his business.

"Is Mrs. de Carnyon within?" he inquired. "If so, will you be good enough to tell her that a gentleman would be glad if she could spare him five minutes?"

While he was waiting for an answer he was permitted a view of an inner room in which a number of small children were seated at their studies. A smell of wet sponges, slates, and cheap hair-oil greeted him and made him almost sick at the repulsiveness of Marcia's surroundings.

Two or three minutes later the pupil teacher returned with the information that if the gentleman would step into the parlour Mrs. de Carnyon would be

at liberty in a few moments, and would see him. He accordingly followed her into a small room at the end of the passage. The door was shut upon him and he was left alone to the contemplation of a map of the world on Mercator's projection, a small shelf of badly bound school-books, a couple of tables embellished with green worsted mats, a glass shade covering a basket of palpably wax fruit, and three antimacassared, but rickety, cane chairs.

He had not very long to wait before he heard a door open somewhere, and a footstep came along the passage towards the apartment in which he was seated. He would have known that step among a thousand. A hand was placed upon the handle of the door, it turned, and Marcia entered the room. She had evidently guessed who her visitor was, for her pale face expressed no surprise. Having closed the door behind her, she bowed and requested his business.

Claude saw that she was as hard as ever, and one glance at her face told him he must not expect his errand to be successful.

"Marcia," he said, "I have not seen you for more than six months; and have you no warmer welcome for your husband than this?"

"After what has passed between us I cannot see that you have any right to expect a welcome at all," she said quietly. "But why are you here? What have you come for?"

A look of fear settled on her face as she looked at him.

"I have come to ask your forgiveness," he said,

"and to try and induce you to come back to me again."

She drew herself up proudly.

"Is this a jest, or am I to consider it in the light of another insult?" she asked.

"I cannot see why you should consider it either," he replied. "Marcia, I mean every word I say. I want you to come back to me, and I will do anything in reason to induce you to do so."

"It would be useless," she answered. "I wonder that you can come to me and ask it."

He looked up at her, and saw that her face was harder and even more set than when she had first entered. There was a look of invincible determination in it that almost frightened him.

"Why do you wonder?" he asked.

"Because I cannot understand how a man who has led the life you have done these last six months can have the audacity to come and ask me to return to him."

"Of what are you accusing me?"

"Of everything that is bad, of everything that is vile. Do you think that because I do not live in the West End I have not heard of your doings? Look at your writings—look at your books—look at your plays—and if you want more, consider your behaviour with that other woman."

"What other woman are you referring to?"

"To Lady Beckleton."

"Marcia, you misjudge me and you misjudge her; upon my soul you do."

"If I do, God will forgive me. As I told you on our wedding-day, I am fighting His battle, not my own."

"Will nothing I can do or say induce you to reconsider your decision? To prove that I am really in earnest, Marcia, I will even promise that if you will come back to me I will give up my books and my work for the stage, and will try to make you happy in any other walk of life you may choose."

But she only shook her head.

"It cannot be. I will not be bribed."

"For pity's sake, Marcia, consider what you are doing," he cried. "I am in desperate straits. I am trying to save my honour and what is more precious to me than life itself. You can save me if you will. If you let me go now I believe I shall perish, body and soul."

She sat down on a rickety little chair by the window and buried her face in her hands. Claude rose and approached a step nearer to her.

"For God's sake, Marcia, save me," he said. "Take me back as your husband, and I will lead any sort of life you may choose for me. If you drive me away now I warn you my sins will lie at your door."

Marcia rose and faced him.

"Tell me this," she said, "and answer me truthfully as you fear God's punishment on the Last Great Day. Are you asking me to take you back for your own sake or for the sake of another?"

To this Claude offered no reply; he only bowed his head.

When she saw this her face became even harder than before.

"Now, one more question, and then I will give you my decision. Answer me truthfully, Claude de Carnyon—do you love me?"

"If you——"

"No! I only want your answer to that question. As God is above you, do you love me—yes or no?"

"No!"

"Very well, then, you have decided for yourself. Now go. I never wish to see your face, or even to hear of you, again. Why you have come to me like this, I cannot tell; but you have your answer. Go!"

He rose as heavily as an old man, and went towards the door.

"Marcia," he said, as he turned for the last time to her, "I have asked you to save my soul and you have refused. Whatever I do now will lie at your door."

She did not answer, but still stood looking out of the window with her back towards him. Seeing that further entreaty was useless, he went down the little passage and out into the street.

"Where to, sir?" asked the cabman when his fare had taken his seat again.

"Back to where you first picked me up."

On reaching his house he passed straight to the studio.

Another telegram lay on the table. Trembling like a leaf, he picked it up and tore it open. It was not signed, but he knew from whom it came. The message flickered before him like letters of fire.

"Bellaker's dance. For pity's sake do not fail. If you are not there you know the consequences."

"To-morrow night!" said Claude to himself. "Then she is coming home to-day. This is the end. I will resist no longer. I have tried to go straight, but Fate won't let me. Why should I struggle any further?"

At that moment a key turned in the lock of the front door, and a quick step entered the hall and came along the passage to the studio. The door opened, and Lee entered the room.

"Why, Mr. de Carnyon," he cried in astonishment at seeing the other, "this is a lovely surprise. I did not expect to see you."

"I hope you're not disappointed," said Claude, smiling at the look of pleasure on the young man's eager face.

"I'm more delighted than I can say," replied the other. Then, seeing how pale his benefactor was, he said, "But you're not looking well, Mr. de Carnyon!"

"I'm not very fit," Claude replied. "But it's nothing very much, and I shall be all right to-morrow. By the way, Lee, I have to offer you my heartiest congratulations on your success. I always knew you'd do it, and I can tell you I'm proud of you."

"If it hadn't been for you I never should have done it," said Lee. "As I have said, over and over again to my sister, I owe all my success to you."

They shook hands, and as they did so Claude realised that when he disappeared there would be at least one person in his old world who would regret him.

CHAPTER XIV

THE DUCHESS OF BELLAKER'S BALL

Of all the brilliant social functions that winter, the ball given by the Duchess of Bellaker at her superb residence in Eaton Square may surely claim to have been the most brilliant. All the leaders of the fashionable world from Royalty down to commonplace millionaires were present, and everything that art, hospitality, and wealth could do to render it successful was done.

Claude did not put in an appearance until nearly midnight, and so bitter had been his conflict with himself all day that when he descended from his cab on to the carpeted pavement he felt more dead than alive. Entering the great hall, he followed his name up between the lines of powdered footmen to the spot, on the first landing, where his hostess was still receiving her guests. On seeing him she took a few steps forward to meet him. She was a magnificent woman and carried herself superbly.

"How good of you to come to us, Mr. de Carnyon!" she said, as she gave him her hand. "I did not in the least expect you, as I had heard that you were still abroad."

"I returned yesterday," answered Claude. "I should be worse than discourteous if I allowed any distance to prevent my accepting your hospitality."

"I'm afraid you're a sad flatterer," her Grace replied, tapping him on the arm with her fan. Then, turning to a little wizened man by her side, she said, "By the way, I don't think you know my husband, do you? My dear, let me introduce you to Mr. de Carnyon, whose play you remember you enjoyed so much last night."

"Ah! To be sure, to be sure!" murmured his Grace of Bellaker, who had certainly visited the theatre in question the previous evening, but had slept in a corner of the box from the moment of entering until it was time to leave again. "A remarkable play, indeed. You are to be highly congratulated, sir."

Seeing some other people coming up behind him, Claude bowed his acknowledgments of the compliment and went on up the stairs to the great ball-room.

Large as the room was, it was crowded to excess, but every one seemed to know the tall, handsome man with the clear-cut face and wavy hair who entered. He had received a programme from the footman at the door more for appearance' sake than for anything else. Now he wandered about the room, stopping occasionally to speak to some acquaintance, but always on the look-out for one particular face. While he was searching, the orchestra commenced the introduction to the next waltz, and following the example of others near him he stepped into an alcove to allow the dancers room. Eagerly he scanned every couple as they passed him, but for some time he could not distinguish the person he wanted. Then, just as he was beginning to imagine she could not be present, he saw her

gliding by in the arms of a famous Austrian statesman, then the rage in London. As she came directly in front of him she lifted her eyes and saw him. That one look overcame all his scruples, and with breathless impatience he waited for the music to stop. As soon as it did he crossed the room to where she was standing, near the door of the great conservatory, sweeping her enormous fan slowly to and fro before her face. Never in his life before had Claude seen her look so beautiful. She was exquisite in face and figure.

"You are late, Mr. de Carnyon," she said languidly, for the benefit of the bystanders.

"Not too late for one dance, I hope," pleaded Claude, with an expression of repentance.

"Well, as Sir Philip Oxborough, to whom I promised one yesterday, is not coming, it just happens that I can give you the next, but you don't deserve it."

"I am the more grateful," answered Claude.

The orchestra recommenced, and Claude and his partner started. Their steps suited each other perfectly, and as they swayed round the room, his arm round her waist, the scent of her hair, and the delicious consciousness of her presence stole into his brain and intoxicated him like finest wines. When they came back to the place where she had been standing when he had asked her for the dance, she whispered—

"Take me out of this. I want to talk to you."

Offering her his arm, he led her from the ball-room into the conservatory, and finding a snugger prepared among the palms, he bade her seat herself. Not until he had ascertained that they could not be spied upon,

or their conversation overheard, did he take his place beside her.

"I received your telegram," he began, when he had done so, "but I confess I did not understand it."

"Claude," she answered, "that's not true. You know very well why I sent it."

Claude examined the button of his left glove carefully. His heart was beating so violently that he could hardly trust himself to speak. At last he found his voice, and, to gain time to think, said politely—

"I hope you had a pleasant crossing."

"Don't! don't!" she cried, as if in pain. "How can you talk so calmly? It seems like the most cruel mockery. Oh, Claude, my dear old friend, my lover, are you going to let me go on much longer like this? You told me the other night that you loved me. I have nursed that thought and treasured it ever since more fondly than a miser does his gold. It has given me fresh life, fresh hope. Oh, Claude! I love you so—I love you so."

Her voice ran down to a little sob, and then gave way entirely.

"Loie," he answered huskily, "God knows I love you, and would give my life for you. This sort of thing cannot go on, it is killing us both. But have you thought what it means—have you thought what you are asking me to do?"

"I have thought of everything," she answered. "I am asking you to take me away. To take me away to some place where nobody will know us, and where we can live our own life together for love. Claude, I love

you more fondly than woman ever loved man before; and you love me—I am convinced of that. If I had been allowed to marry you I should have been a good woman. But we did not meet until too late, and then I had been sold to that man instead. You see the result. If you will take me away, Claude, I will give you such love as other men never dream of. If you will not I will destroy myself, and there will be an end to it. I cannot live without you, nor can I go on living as I am now. I know it is unwomanly of me to plead like this, but I cannot help it, I am desperate.”

“Hush! hush! you mustn’t talk in this fashion. Be quiet for a moment and let me think.”

“No, no. Don’t think until you have promised me. Will you take me away, Claude, or will you let me go home to my death to-night? For I swear to you that if you refuse me I will kill myself before to-morrow morning. Won’t that convince you?”

Claude put his arm round her and drew her towards him.

“Loie,” he whispered passionately, “God knows I love you to distraction. The world has no other woman to me but you. I have been your slave ever since that first night at the theatre. If I have hesitated it has only been for your sake. Now my mind is made up, and I will do whatever you wish.”

He kissed her on the lips.

“You give me a new existence,” she cried. “A new life of love is opening to me. Oh, Claude, you shall never regret it! I will be your slave—your loving, willing slave. I will give my whole being into your

keeping. Take me away somewhere; let us go back to the blue Pacific; let us find some island where we can be alone out of the world, to live only for our Love and Art."

"Yes," said Claude softly, "we will go back to the Pacific, and, as you say, we will live only for Love and Art."

CHAPTER XV

AN UNEXPECTED DISCOVERY

A letter from the Rev. Herbert Perceval, of the island of Rokhama, in the Sandwich group, to the Rev. George Mainwaring, Rector of Upper Domning, in the county of Somerset, England:—

“ROKHAMA, *July 15, 18—*.

“MY DEAR MAINWARING,—Your cheery monthly epistle reached me by the mail on Tuesday last, and as usual gave me unqualified pleasure. It would be impossible for you, in your pretty little English Rectory in your model village, with the railway line to London running almost to your door, your daily paper, your Primrose League, Temperance Society, Penny Readings, and all your thousand and one interests, to imagine how welcome those three closely written sheets of cheery gossip can be to a man who loves the life and yet is outside it all. I suppose one ought not to hanker after the fleshpots of Egypt, if I may so characterise the things mentioned above, but one is only human after all. The smallest things are of moment to me. Your little reference to the weight of the pig you were to sell on the day of writing, seemed of vital importance because, as I read, in my

mind's eye, I could see the fat old fellow reclining in his sty at the bottom of your garden, and could well remember the time when we used to take our almost daily stroll in the same direction in order to poke our sticks into the sides of, and to allow you the chance of extolling the merits of, I suppose, this prodigy's ancestor.

"You tell me you have named your youngest boy, born since last I saw you, after me. I thank you from the bottom of my heart. It is a new link between us, I shall pray to our Father in heaven to bless his life. and raise him up for a joy to you.

"And now I must tell you something of my doings since I last wrote you. And, between ourselves, I think I have the makings of an extraordinary story for you. At the same time I feel I must ask you to keep what I tell you to yourself. But I should like your advice upon it.

"As you know, it is my custom to visit in my mission schooner the different outlying islands under my charge every three months. First I sail for Honolulu, where I obtain my supply of stores, and then put off to call at my various stations in their proper order. Well, at the beginning of this month I followed my usual programme, called at the capital and then made my way slowly back to Rokhama, visiting my native pastors, holding services, baptising and marrying as I found necessary *en route*.

"This time I returned by a somewhat different way, and three days from my own island found myself abreast of a small island which has the reputation of

being very beautiful but at the same time sparsely populated. Hitherto I had never landed on it. However, as the afternoon was well advanced, and the lagoon across the reef seemed likely to afford a good anchorage, I resolved to spend the night there, and accordingly bade my skipper make the necessary preparations for getting inside. That done, and as soon as the anchor was down, my boat was manned and I was pulled ashore.

"To you, my dear fellow, whose notion of the beautiful in Nature is made up of your own quiet English valleys, the Caledonian Canal in the autumn—and shall we say a bi-annular visit to the Swiss Alps?—the scene which I had before me as I approached the shore would have appealed with a new and irresistible force. Behind me was the lagoon as smooth as glass, and set in a girdle of foaming breakers with the schooner poised upon it like a white swan. In front I had a narrow strip of blue water, then a saffron beach running up to a pair of palm-clad hills with a broad valley between them. As my boys pulled me towards the beach I can assure you I thought I had never seen such an exquisite place before.

"My own island is considered one of the prettiest of the group, but it could not compare in the smallest particular with the one I am now describing.

"Just as I was about to land, to my astonishment I saw a man dressed completely in white and wearing a pith helmet upon his head come down a path that led from the valley to the beach. That he was a white man there could be no doubt, and that he was a splen-

did specimen of his race was equally certain. He must have stood well over six feet, was broad in proportion, and carried himself with a grace that is unusual in such big men. His face I was not able to see just then on account of the shadow thrown by his helmet. Evidently he had seen my schooner in the lagoon and had come down to welcome me. This was a pleasurable surprise, and I must confess to a certain curiosity as to who he might be. Probably, I thought, he is a trader settled on the island. But as there were only half a hundred or so inhabitants, what business he could find to do there puzzled me. At any rate the solar topee and the good clothes seemed to speak of a comfortable house, so I began to think I might not be compelled to spend the night on board my schooner after all.

"As soon as we grounded on the beach I sprang out and hastened towards the man who was coming down to receive me.

" 'Good afternoon,' he said, lifting his hat with one hand and holding out the other to me. 'I saw your vessel making for the break in the reef and thought I would come down and welcome you. Have you come far?'

" 'Only from Falaa to-day. My name is Perceval, and I am a missionary. My headquarters are Rokhama, but once every three months I beat up my parish in my schooner. Returning this time I thought I would call here and see if I could do any good with the few islanders that are left. Are there many?'

" 'Scarcely fifty,' he answered, with a peculiar

smile. 'I don't encourage them, you see. When all's said and done they're a confounded nuisance. But don't let us stand here. You will be my guest for to-night, I hope. We do not often have visitors, and when we do they are not, as a rule, cultivated. My wife will be very glad to see you, I'm sure.'

" 'I shall have much pleasure in accepting your hospitality,' I answered. And as I spoke I looked a little more closely at him. I give you my word, Mainwaring, I have never before or since seen such a handsome type of man. To me his face seemed to embody the pure Greek type. Recall the countenance of Hermes, the Greek Mercury, as represented by the production of the torso on the bracket in your own hall, and you have my host as nearly as I can give him to you. It was a face that could only belong to a man of intellect, as I felt my new acquaintance must be. One other thing struck me as remarkable, and that was his voice. It was assuredly the voice of a gentleman, of a man who had mixed in the best society, not perhaps the voice of an Oxford man, if 'Varsity men can be distinguished from any others as I contend, but the sort of voice you can hear for yourself any afternoon in Bond Street in the season. Altogether his manners were perfection. But I must not continue any longer in this strain or you will grow tired of my narrative before I am half through with it.


"Leaving the beach behind us we ascended the narrow path that led up the valley between the two hills. The view was indeed a lovely one. Exquisite palms that have never yet, in spite of their familiarity, quite

lost their charm, reared their graceful heads from a jungle of almost every sort of green stuff the heart of man could imagine. Here all that could delight the palate or charm the eye seem to grow in grandest luxuriance.

"We followed the track along, talking on general island topics, until we reached a stout fence almost covered with creeper. Where the path met it was a gate, and this my companion opened and held open for me to pass through. My surprise was every moment increasing, but when we had threaded a luxuriant orange grove and found ourselves before a charming bungalow residence, round which ran a deep, cool verandah, my astonishment reached its climax. Surely, I thought to myself, as I looked at it, this can be no trading station. But if it were not, what else could it be? Having crossed the lawn that encircled the house my conductor led me up the steps into the verandah. Then turning to me he said—

"'I have not yet told you my name. It is Riversdale—at your service. And now I make you welcome to my home.'

"After pausing for a moment to point out the view he conducted me into the house itself. A handsomer or more comfortable dwelling could hardly be imagined; and I could well picture the surprise of some rough trading captain when, having landed and tracked the smoke that he would have observed from the sea, he found himself admitted to such a house. A brief description of it may interest you in the light of what is to come.



"In the centre of the building was a large square hall or room lighted by a skylight. The floor was of some highly polished wood not unlike chunam, and was partly covered with skins. Between the doors that led out of it the walls were covered with pictures, many of them I should say of considerable worth. No less than four easels stood about the room upholding unfinished works. The most luxurious chairs and divans were scattered about here and there, and the two furthest corners were occupied, one by a superb grand piano, and the other by an enormous writing-table, the latter covered with papers and manuscripts. The lower portions of the walls, from the bottom of the pictures to the floor, were occupied with bookcases, containing altogether, I should imagine, nearly a thousand books, which must have proved a source of considerable anxiety to their owners in such a moist climate.

"So far I have only described the room. Now I must go further and try to give you some notion of the principal and most beautiful thing in it. This, as you will have guessed already, was a woman. When I entered the verandah I caught a glimpse of her standing before one of the easels painting. On my conductor passing into the hall ahead of me she turned, and, seeing me, came forward.

" 'Mr. Perceval,' said my host, 'my wife.'

"She held out her hand and bade me welcome. Then I knew that I had seen and spoken to one of the most beautiful women in all the world. You will say that I am growing too enthusiastic in my old age

First one of the handsomest men and then one of the most beautiful women. But I assure you I am not exaggerating. Such another pair it would be almost impossible to discover. And when I tell you of the discovery I made later on you will probably be able to agree with me.

“‘You arrived in the beautiful little schooner I saw anchored in the lagoon, I suppose, Mr. Perceval,’ she said.

“‘Yes, that is my vessel,’ I answered. ‘She is a handy little craft, and in the course of the year carries me a great many miles.’

“‘We have a schooner, too,’ she continued. ‘At present, however, she is away at Honolulu, bringing us stores.’

“‘Should I be considered impertinent if I asked if you live here all the year round then?’ I said. ‘I had no idea until I saw your husband that the island was inhabited save by a few natives.’

“‘Yes,’ said the man, answering for his wife, and with an expression upon his face I could not quite understand. ‘We live here always. That is, of course, with the exception of the periods when we are cruising in the yacht. My wife and I both desire solitude, and as we could not get it elsewhere we came here.’

“‘I should have imagined you would have found it almost too quiet,’ I said.

“‘If you had my experience of the world I expect you would agree with me that it is impossible to be too quiet anywhere,’ he replied, with a bitterness of

expression there was no mistaking. Then suddenly changing his tone, he said, 'But perhaps as you are interested in the islands you would like to see the place. All things considered it is rather remarkable.'

"I eagerly accepted his offer, and we left the house together.

"From the verandah we passed into the garden. Everywhere I noticed the same air of wealth and care. Nothing was overlooked. The grounds were as perfectly kept as even your own Rectory garden, the fences were strong and well made, the outbuildings all that the most fastidious could desire. At the end of our walk he led me back to the house. By the time we arrived there a room had been prepared for me, and I was conducted to it.

" 'We dine in half an hour in the verandah,' said my host; and with an offer to supply any wants I might have in the way of toilet necessities he left me.

"Not to go too deeply into details—which, as you will have noticed, I am rather prone to do—let me say that we dined, as he had said we should do, in the verandah. It was a warm evening, and the lights and shadows added to the charming effect of the napery and silver upon the table. I don't think I am overstepping the mark when I say that the meal was as perfect as the house and its occupants. We were waited on by native servants who had evidently been well schooled in their duties. They were quick, noiseless and attentive, and what more could you, or any man, desire? It was the first time for nearly five years that I had dined in such a way, and the experience

was an exceedingly pleasant one, I can assure you. Both my host and hostess were brilliant talkers on almost every conceivable subject, and if it had not been for the palms beyond the verandah rails, the cooked bananas, and the other Pacific dishes upon the table, the native servants, and the perfume of frangipanni blossom and wild lime that pervaded everything, I might very well have imagined myself back in Europe. I can safely say I never enjoyed myself more.

“When coffee made its appearance, cigars and cigarettes were placed upon the table, and for the first time in my life I saw a lady smoke. It was a novel and, I must confess, not altogether a displeasing sight.

“For something like an hour and a half we sat smoking and talking of men, books, pictures, plays, music, and a hundred other things which were of immense interest to me, seeing how long I had been cut off from the enjoyment of them. An hour's delightful music followed, in the central hall, and then I began to think it would soon be time to retire.

“Here, however, I must narrate a little circumstance which, because I could not understand it, puzzled me a good deal at the time. In the papers which you were good enough to send me with your letter, and which arrived at my hermit's cell a day prior to my starting on this cruise, I had read a notice of a new play produced at the Shakspeare. As far as the dramatist's name went it was by a new and entirely unknown man. But I noticed that the critics seemed inclined to believe it showed too much cleverness of construction to be the work of a 'prentice hand. One in particular

tried to prove that the methods and the general style were not unlike those of the famous Claude de Carnyon, who, as you know, suddenly disappeared with a prominent lady of fashion a couple of years ago. I commented on this similarity of treatment, and asked my new friends if they had seen any account of the play. Instantly another change was observable in my host, and he answered shortly that he had seen the account, and then abruptly changed the conversation by inquiring if I were tired, and whether I would care to go to my room. I could see that I had, as the saying goes, put my foot in it, but what I had done I was at a loss to conjecture. Seeing, however, that I was expected to retire, I bade them both good-night and departed. Not being in the humour for sleep I took down a book from a shelf near my bed, and glanced into it. It was an old battered copy of the *Morte d'Arthur*, and had inside the cover, above a Balliol label—just fancy that!—the owner's name, Claude de Carnyon. When I saw that I understood everything.

“Next morning I was the first astir, and having dressed went out into the verandah. It was a perfect morning. The sun was just rising over the hilltop, and every tree and shrub was gemmed with dew. From the right-hand corner a glimpse could be obtained of the sea, with my schooner riding at her anchor on the lagoon.

“Suddenly I heard a step behind me, and on turning confronted my host.

“As on the previous day, he was dressed in white from top to toe. Perhaps that may have had some-

thing to do with it, for you know how white often intensifies a sallow complexion, but I could not help thinking that he looked ill and careworn, and also as if he had passed a sleepless night that was not the first by many. He shook hands with me and then asked if I could spare him five moments' conversation. I said I would willingly do so, and we walked into the garden.

" 'Mr. Perceval,' he said, coming to a standstill when we reached the gate, 'you told me yesterday that you could not spend longer with us than one night. If you must go to-day I want to know if you will do me a favour first. I want you to hold a little service for us. I will not tell you any more than that I want you to pray for an erring man and woman. God knows they need your prayers.'

" 'I will do so most willingly,' I answered. 'I am glad you asked me.'

"Then we went back to the house.

"Accordingly, as soon as breakfast was finished, having obtained my hostess's permission, I read Psalm li. and offered up a few prayers for the forgiveness of any sins our little party might have committed. The man and woman followed me with the deepest attention.

"When we rose from our knees I saw that Mrs. Riversdale was very pale. She thanked me impressively for my kindness and then bade me goodbye and vanished from the room. Her husband and I were left alone together. He was even more silent than before, and seemed rather relieved than otherwise when I told him I must be going.

" 'I'll walk with you to the beach,' he said, and when we had found our hats we accordingly set off.

"Having reached my boat I shook hands again with him and asked if he would care for me to fit in my arrangements so as to give him a call on my next trip round.

" 'We shall be very pleased to see you,' he answered solemnly. Then, as if he felt he ought to say something on the subject, he added, 'I am exceedingly obliged to you for your kindness this morning. It may be some satisfaction to you to know that you have made me a happier man.'

" 'I am truly glad to hear it,' I answered. 'If I can ever help you in any way be sure I shall be only too glad to do so.'

" 'You are very kind,' he answered, this time almost carelessly. Then, after a pause, with a sort of sudden and fierce eagerness, he said, 'Tell me this, Mr. Perceval, before you go, and I ask you as a man of God. Do you think God would allow a man to save another's soul by sacrificing himself?'

" 'I told him it was my earnest conviction that God would forgive anything if the repentance were only sincere.

" 'Aye,' he said, 'I understand. But you beg the question. What I ask is, supposing the person herself does not repent, can another save her?'

" 'That must remain with God,' I answered. 'He alone can decide.'

"He drove the stick he carried in his hand deep into the sand, and then dragged it out again. Having

done so he glanced at the boat that was waiting to take me off to the schooner, and, holding out his hand, bade me goodbye, and retraced his steps up the beach without another word. I stepped into my boat, boarded my craft, and in an hour's time was out of sight of the island.

"Ever since then I have been thinking over that curious experience. God knows I would do anything in my power to help the man. But since I can only guess his trouble, I do not see in what way I can assist him. But ever since I left him the recollection of his face has haunted me. For the life of me I cannot rid myself of it, and my object in telling you all this is to see if you can advise me as to the course I should pursue. My own opinion is, the man is capable of anything—I mean of any sacrifice. He looks desperate and afraid. But of what I cannot say. That he loves the woman, one has only to see them together to be certain of. She also loves him beyond anything; but it is in a different way. God alone knows what the end of their affection is to be. I intend to call upon them on my next round and see what I can do. In the meantime I can only send up my earnest prayers to the Throne of Grace for their forgiveness and salvation.

"I had intended to ask you many questions as to the welfare of mutual friends, but I find time and space will not permit of it. I must, therefore, postpone them for a month.

"Remember me to your good wife and family, and believe that God may bless you and yours is ever the sincere prayer of

"Your affectionate old chum, HERBERT PERCEVAL."

CHAPTER XVI

A STORM AND A RESOLVE

It was the second anniversary of the Duchess of Bel-laker's famous ball. On the little landspot in the Pacific upon which Claude and Loie had installed themselves after their hegira, it was the hottest day they had experienced that year. Overhead the sun shone with dazzling brightness; there was neither a cloud in the sky nor a breath in the air. The palms beyond the verandah rails stood motionless in the glare, and the only sound to be heard was the thunder of the surf upon the reef half a mile or so away.

In a corner of the hall Loie reclined upon a cane sofa, fanning herself with a kadjang leaf and puffing the smoke of a cigarette which she held between her lips into dainty circles above her head. In the two years that had passed since she had made her willing sacrifice for love, she had scarcely changed at all. Indeed, had it not been for a certain faint expression of anxiety that seemed to have settled itself upon her face, her old friends would most probably have failed to notice any difference in her at all.

Clad only in a flannel shirt and a pair of white duck trousers, the latter rolled up above his bare ankles, Claude stood painting at the larger easel. In spite of the intense heat, he was working with feverish energy,

only stopping to examine his work or to address some remark to his companion.

But if the woman had not altered since they had left the Great World together, as much could not be said of the man. Though, as I have already twice stated, only two years had elapsed, a great change had come over him, and in the last two months, that is since the visit of the missionary Perceval to the island, it had become even more pronounced than before. His face looked older, the hair upon his temples was not so thick as it had once been, and what there was was becoming every week more and more flaked with grey; ominous lines were making their appearance round his eyes and mouth, and the old sunny, alert expression that had once been his chief characteristic was fast giving way to another that at times seemed almost one of terror.

The explanation was not far to seek. His love for Loie was not waning in the least degree; very far from it. And yet for the reason that every day he was growing to care for her more and more, it was on her account alone that he was frightened. He loved her with the whole force of his exuberant nature. To him the world was well lost that he might have her by his side. But he was not so sure as to the justice to Loie of what he had done. An innately religious man, he had been convinced from the beginning that in taking her from her husband he was violating one of God's most stringent commands, and so earning for himself eternal punishment. Now he was beginning to fear lest in consenting to her pleading he had brought the

woman whose love he valued more than his own soul to the same irretrievable ruin. Shut up in the solitude of the island, working always at high pressure, seeing scarcely one strange face in six months, he had been thinking and thinking in the same peculiar strain. In the silence of the island God seemed so very near. He fancied he could hear His voice in the roll of the surf, the roar of the thunder, and the whistle of the wind, and that he could see His majesty in the clouds by day and in the flashing of the lightning and the shining of the star-lit heavens by night.

Being quite convinced as to his own doom, he did not waste time thinking of himself, but put all his energy into the task of discovering a way to save her. He knew that she had no religious belief, that she lived only for him day by day, without care, in blissful unconsciousness of the future. This made his anxiety doubly acute. It was with him when he slept, and it was with him when he rose up; work as he would, exert himself as he would, it never left him. He was chained hand and foot to this one great deed. Having once crossed the Rubicon he was aware there could be no drawing back, nor could he persuade her to leave him, for the deed was done and there would be nowhere now for her to go to. She was an outcast, and so was he. It was wonderful, he thought, that the thunderbolts of heaven did not descend and destroy them where they stood.

Suddenly Loie rose from her sofa and went out into the verandah. She had not been there a minute before she was back again in the room.

"A visitor, Claude," she cried. "There is a schooner anchored in the lagoon."

He put down his palette and brushes on the table and joined her. Sure enough there was a topsail schooner in the act of dropping her anchor.

"I wonder who it can be," he said. "It's not the *Water Witch*, nor is it Perceval's craft; I think I shall go down and find out."

Taking his hat from a chair, he put it on and went down the path towards the beach. It was still intensely hot, and with the exception of the little brown and gold lizards that wriggled through the hot sand across his path, he seemed to be the only bit of active life upon the island.

When he reached the shore he was able to take better stock of the visitor. She was a vessel of about a hundred and fifty tons, and was evidently a trader. Seeing that she made no sign of sending ashore, he pushed his own boat into the water and paddled out to her. The lagoon was as dazzling as a dish of quicksilver, and so clear was the pale green water that he could have distinguished a pin at a depth of thirty feet had there been one to see.

On reaching the vessel, whose name he discovered was the *Maid of Orkney*, he hitched on and clambered aboard. His arrival had evidently not been noticed, though when he made his appearance there were at least half a dozen native hands on deck. Without paying any attention to them, he walked aft and rapped with his knuckles on the door of the house. As no one answered, he pushed it open and entered. What he

saw there nearly made him recoil with horror. In the centre of the floor were two men, one tall and the other short, wrestling as if for their lives, while a native seaman crouched in a corner watched them with the light of pure terror in his eyes. The taller of the pair was a fine muscular young fellow, about four-and-twenty years of age; his opponent was smaller, but very broad, and might have been anything from forty-five to fifty. He had a head of bright red hair and a ragged beard of the same colour, and while the taller man was fully dressed, he wore only a ragged suit of striped pyjamas. His early experience, and one glance at his face, told Claude that he was in an advanced stage of *delirium tremens*.

At last the elder man fell to the ground exhausted, and the combat came to an end. Before he could rise, however, his adversary was upon him, and calling the native to his assistance, had clapped him, raving like a madman, into a strait-waistcoat. This done, he was lifted into his bunk, and the victor turned and saw Claude.

"Good-day!" he said, coming towards the door, and examining, as he did so, a long scratch upon the back of his left hand. "I'm sorry I didn't see you come aboard, but it was about time I got that joker made secure. He's been raising merry hell aboard this boat to-day with a revolver."

"I'm afraid I'm rather in the way," Claude said, as the young man shut the door. "Where are you from?"

"From Manila *via* Honolulu to Sydney," replied the other. "The man you saw in there is the skipper, I'm

the mate. The carpenter is dead, shot by that old ruffian when he began to go cracked yesterday. But won't you come inside and sit down? I can offer you some prime gin if he hasn't finished it all."

Claude declined both invitations as civilly as he could. He had no desire to enter the house with that maniac raving in his bunk, so he proposed that they should talk outside.

"You seem to have had a rough time of it," he said, when they had got into the shade. "What was the reason of the captain's outbreak?"

"Because he's had as precious a fright as ever a man had," answered the mate. "A week ago yesterday we put into Vaamoa for water."

"That's the leper island in the Ladrone, is it not?"

"Yes. The place where they put away every poor devil who catches the disease. Better far knock 'em on the head there and then, I say. What do you think?"

"Far better," said Claude. "Well, and what happened at Vaamoa?"

"That I can't exactly tell you," said the mate, "but one thing's pretty certain. Whatever he saw or did he came off again at night in such a fright that he couldn't sleep a wink, but must needs have us to make sail and clear out there and then. He kept saying he'd seen hell—he'd seen hell—he'd seen hell. And every time he said it he took another swig at the bottle to pull himself together."

"Is the island, then, really so bad?"

"Bad? It's just what he said it was and a bit more

besides. Cranky as he generally is, he wasn't wrong there. It's hell—simply hell. Imagine it for yourself. The Dons hunt up every poor devil of a nigger that's got any sign of the disease on him, take him away from his home without a 'by your leave' or wherefore, and ship him off to Vaamoa just to die or live as best he can. They're supposed to have huts, but I wouldn't put a dog I'd given sixpence for in one of 'em. There they live anywhere and anyhow. If they die they're sometimes buried, but as often as not they're left just where they drop. If they live it's only till they can't hang on any longer. Yes; I reckon if there's no hell anywhere else it's on Vaamoa."

"And so your skipper has been ashore there, and doesn't want to go back again?" said Claude, more for the sake of saying something than for any other reason.

"Again? Well, I believe you," answered the mate. "He'd rather be strung up to the yardarm. And yet I can't understand it, for he's seen a good deal in his time, has Captain Blockyear, and it takes a goodish bit to turn his stomach, I can tell you."

"And do you mean to tell me the Spanish Government let this place exist? Is nothing ever done?"

"Bless you, no! Who's to do it? And besides, who knows about it? There ain't many ships go there, and those who do clear out again as soon as they jolly well can. I'll bet we don't go there again. If you could have heard the old man carrying on last night you wouldn't either."

"Well, now, what can I do for you? Will you come ashore, or can I send you anything down?"

"No, I don't know that you can," the young fellow replied. "I shall spend the night here, fill my beakers at that spring yonder in the morning, and then get under way again directly the tide serves. By the time we reach Sydney Heads the old man ought to be pretty well himself again."

"You are sure I cannot assist you in any way?"

"Quite sure, and I thank you kindly. Are you going? Well, then, good-day to you. Hot, isn't it? The glass is down to nothing. I shouldn't be surprised if there is trouble ahead."

"It looks very much like it," said Claude, and then scrambled down into his boat again. "I suppose you'll be all right in here?"

"Oh, we shall be all right," said the young man, and then waved his hand in farewell.

All the time he was pulling himself ashore, while he was walking back to his house, throughout the midday meal, and all the afternoon, the recollection of the mate's description of the plague-stricken island of Vaamoa haunted Claude like the remembrance of an evil dream. He could not rid his thoughts of it, try how he would.

Towards the end of the afternoon the heat became more oppressive than ever. There was a dry, thundery feel about the air that, as the mate had said, suggested trouble later on.

As usual, Claude and Loie dined in the verandah. During the progress of the meal heavy clouds gathered in the sky, and a low moaning noise, that could not mean anything but wind, came from over the sea.

"We are in for a storm," said Claude, as a flash of lightning flickered over the horizon; "and if I am not mistaken it will be a big one."

"'Blow winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!'" quoted Loie, dipping her fingers in her finger-bowl, and flicking them towards the rising storm. "I love a hurricane. I remember as a child how I used to lie awake and listen to the shrieking of the wind, laughing when the others shivered with fear. I think there must have been something uncanny about me as a child, Claude. What do you think?"

"You certainly were peculiar."

"It seems to me I've been different to other people ever since. Old Lady Marmadon once told my father, when I'd given her an exhibition of my temper, that she thought I was hardly human. I'm sure Bec——"

She stopped herself suddenly, and leaning forward, took up her case and extracted a cigarette.

"Never mind. *Vive la joie!*" she said, as she lit it and threw the match away. "What does anything matter in the wide, wide world, Claude, since I have you, and you have me? 'Since I have you and you have me?' Now where on earth have I heard that line before? Ah, I remember. It was part of a song Marjory Denville used to sing. Can't you seem to see her opening her froggy mouth and making faces before she begins—just like this?"

She gave an imitation, but Claude did not see it. He was watching the lightning and thinking of the island of which the mate had told him that morning. His vivid imagination pictured it for him, and supplied

the horrors of the inhabitants *ad libitum*. Loie, however, would not let him be silent long.

"Amuse me, Claude," she cried imperiously. "I am 'under the weather,' as the American girl used to say, and must be taken out of myself to-night."

"What is the matter with you?"

"I don't know. I feel as if something horrible is about to happen."

"It's the thunder that does it. My God!"

A flash of lightning cut the sky. It was so vivid that it made them both start back. A moment later the thunder pealed out and shook the house to its foundations. It was followed by another flash and still another clap. Loie rose from her chair with her hands pressed to her face.

"I shall go inside," she said. "I am frightened, Claude. This sort of thing is too awful."

The lightning was now almost incessant, and the moaning noise from over the sea was increasing in volume every moment. Claude stood leaning against the verandah rails, watching, listening, and thinking all the time.

About eleven the storm died down, and for nearly an hour a ghostly quiet reigned, in which it was possible for him to plainly hear the ticking of the various clocks in the house behind him.

He wondered what had become of Loie, and went into the house to find out. To his surprise he found her huddled up on the green cane sofa, half dressed, with her face as white as snow and her glorious hair lying in confusion upon her shoulders.

"Come to me, Claude," she cried. "I am frightened—I am terrified."

He went across, and kneeling beside the sofa, put his arm round her. She was silent for some minutes, and then she whispered—

"I have never known such a night as this, Claude. It's too dreadful—first the storm and then this awful quiet. What does it mean? Do you think it's the end of the world?"

"Only an atmospheric disturbance, dear," he answered. "You must not distress yourself. By morning it will be all gone and we shall have blue sky and sunshine again."

But his cheerful words had no effect upon her. She was trembling like a leaf. Claude saw that she was more than half hysterical, and this knowledge only added to his anxiety.

Suddenly the clock on the wall above their heads struck twelve, and almost at the same instant, as if it were regulated by the same machinery, the storm rose with quadrupled fury. First came a flash of lightning that lit up the whole room and enabled him even to see the pictures on the easels, then a roar of thunder that was like the booming of a thousand cannon. This had hardly passed before there came the hissing noise of the wind rushing up the valley. Next moment it was upon the house, shrieking through the verandah, banging the doors like thunder-claps, and bending the palms before it almost to the ground. It was impossible to hear one speak. Claude saw Loie throw herself face downwards on her cushions and he could feel

that she was trembling. Still the thunder and the lightning continued, and still the wind whistled. The flame of the lamp upon the table spluttered and guttered and threw strange shadows upon the walls. Then once more the storm dropped and there came another hush, this time so awe-inspiring, so complete, that it seemed, after the noise of the hurricane, to touch the man and woman like positive pain. Loie lifted her head and faced her companion, her eyes wide with terror.

"What does it mean?" she whispered hoarsely. "Tell me, Claude—are we to die?"

Claude did not answer, but waited and listened.

"Is it intended for a judgment on us?" cried Loie, clinging to him with the tenacity of despair.

"Be quiet, for God's sake! Don't speak!"

"Why should I not? If it is a judgment let it come. I am not afraid. If you love me, Claude, I don't care what happens. If there is a God He'll——"

"Be silent!" cried Claude. "You don't know what you're saying. You cut me to the heart."

He rose from his place beside her, and leaving her to take care of herself, went out into the verandah. Once there, he knelt down beside the rails and covered his face with his hands. He was wrought up to a pitch that was almost madness.

"O God of heaven," he cried, and his voice sounded in the stillness with extraordinary clearness, "be merciful to me a sinner. Give light, I implore Thee, to this woman in her darkness, and save her. Do with me as Thou wilt, but teach me in what way I may

redeem her soul. O God, I confess my fault, and my sin is ever before me. Show me Thy way that I may teach her to walk therein."

As he finished a fresh gale of wind came up the valley, and the house trembled before it. It shrieked amid the trees rising and falling like the notes of an Eolian harp.

With his head bent down upon his hands, Claude still knelt and prayed, putting the whole strength of his being into his supplications for enlightenment and guidance. It was not for himself he pleaded, but that he might be permitted to save from destruction the soul of the woman he loved. He was trembling under the weight of his emotion, and his condition was almost as hysterical as Loie's had been an hour before.

Suddenly he lifted his head and looked into the dark night before him. And as he looked he saw, or thought he saw, a vision. Among the wind-tossed trees in front of him was a circle of blue light, and in this light the figure of a man—a leper in the last straits of his disease. He was holding out his stumps of arms as if imploring help, and his cry seemed to be—

"Come over and help us. Lift us out of our misery. Give us some comfort, and then God will save the soul of her you love."

Claude dropped his head on to his hands once more, and when a few minutes later he looked up again all was dark as before.

To Claude the vision seemed as real as the black night in which he was now plunged. Not for one

moment did he doubt but that it was a call from God in direct answer to his prayer. There was no uncertainty now, no asking for enlightenment. He knew what was expected of him, his path of duty lay clear before him, and he meekly bowed his head and said, "Thy will be done!"

As he rose to his feet a wild cry rang out into the darkness, and next moment a terrified native sprang into the verandah shrieking that the high cliff behind the house was slipping. Without pausing an instant Claude flew into the hall and made for the couch where he had left Loie. She lay there fast asleep. Then taking her in his arms he rushed out into the verandah again, down the steps, and across the garden towards the hill on the opposite side. The coarse grasses and sharp stones cut his naked feet like razor-blades; but he did not think of that, he only flew on for dear life, carrying the woman in his arms and accompanied by a crowd of terrified natives. They were only just in time, for as they reached a little plateau directly opposite the house they heard an ominous cracking noise behind them. Then there was a moment of breathless uncertainty, and an instant later a terrific rumble and a crash that sounded as if the world were falling in pieces. It was still so dark that they could not see what had happened, and Claude would allow no one to move till it was light.

When day dawned an extraordinary scene presented itself. The great wall of cliff that had hitherto upreared itself behind the house had fallen forward, burying the house beneath it. Nothing but broken

timbers, giant rocks, and mounds of earth and debris remained to show what a few hours before had been a sumptuous dwelling-house.

"What are we to do now?" wailed Loie, to whom this catastrophe seemed only a fitting conclusion to the other horrors of the night.

Then, kneeling beside her, Claude told her all his thoughts, finishing with an account of the vision he had seen in the night.

She listened, white to the very lips. His haggard face, the air of resolve that sat upon him, the new and extraordinary light in his eyes, frightened her almost as much as the storm had done.

"And if you are resolved upon this madness what is to become of me?" she asked, with forced calmness, when he had finished.

"You need have no fear on that score," he answered slowly, wondering in what way it could be managed. "I shall see that you are provided for."

"You are going to send me away from you?"

"I cannot take you with me, Loie," he said. "You have no notion of the sort of place to which I am going."

"You cannot send me away—that is, unless you wish to kill me."

"Then what can I do?"

"You must take me with you," she answered. "You must let me help you. Claude, you know I would give my life for you. I can help. I am not afraid. Even hell itself would be heaven to me with you, and without you heaven would be hell."

"No! no! I cannot take you with me, Loie," he said. "It would be an inhuman thing to do."

"Then I swear I will kill myself the moment you have gone. Think of that. Remember, Claude, I can keep my word. I swear solemnly by my love for you, that if you go without me I will kill myself that instant. Now, will you take me? Do you love me, Claude?"

"Oh, how can you ask such a thing? God knows I do!"

"Then take me with you. By our love I swear you shall not go alone. If our sin has been as great as you say, it is right that I should share your work with you. If you are making your sacrifice to God, why should you deny me the opportunity of making mine?"

He looked at her with a startled face. This was putting a new complexion on the matter. If this chance were given her to work out her own salvation he had no right to take it from her. He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it.

"God's hand is in this, love," he answered. "Who am I that I should attempt to defeat His ends? We will go together."

And so it was settled between them.

CHAPTER XVII

THE ISLAND OF VAAMOA

The sun was like a ball of fire upon the western sea-line when the schooner which was conveying Claude and Loie to Vaamoa first sighted the island. The sea was as smooth as green glass, and all the world was hushed, as if in contemplation of the sacrifice the man and woman standing on the deck of that tiny craft were making.

Side by side, they had been waiting for some time in the bows of the boat, watching for the first sign of the island to make its appearance above the waves. They had been ten days at sea, and during that time they had passed through an awful period of probation. Furnished with sufficient leisure for thought, they had come to understand something, but not all, of what they had set themselves to do. Upon Claude, the remembrance that Loie was to share the danger with him sat with a heaviness and a sense of grim despair that never lifted night or day. It had been God's will that he should take upon himself the work of succoring the lepers of Vaamoa. It was an opportunity granted to him by Heaven for retrieving his own sin, and saving the soul of the woman he loved. But in allowing her to accompany him and to bear her share in the

work, he was suffering all the agonies of a punishment that was greater than even the promise of eternal damnation.

Loie, on the other hand, after the first dread of contracting the disease had left her, regarded her future in an altogether different light. She was perfectly well aware that having once taken the irrevocable step she would in all human probability never be allowed to return to civilised life again. But her love for the man with whom she had said goodbye to England was greater than any fear of death, and so if he were intent upon proceeding she would surely do so too, let the result be what it might. Claude had always, so she felt compelled to tell herself, been full of fads. This was probably the last and greatest. But for all that he was Claude, and she loved him, and if he cared to surrender a life of happiness and comfort with herself in order to ameliorate the condition of a couple of hundred or so natives in whom he was not called upon to take any possible interest—well, she was certainly not going to let him do it alone. At the very idea of such a thing she tossed her head back and laughed. Claude, in the adjoining cabin, heard her, and the sound carried him back instantly to the morning when he had decided to leave Samoa to seek fame and fortune in the great world. He had sought and found it, and the trip to Vaamoa was the result.

Suddenly, across the plain of opal-coloured sea, there was a break in the horizon, from which rose, little by little, the ragged outline of a mountain range. An hour later, just as dusk was falling, they had

arrived within a few miles of it and could plainly distinguish the breaking of the surf upon the reef and the cluster of huts on the little plateau above the beach. A more desolate, barren, wind-tossed place it would be scarcely possible to imagine. The mountains were high and rugged, broken by innumerable ravines and water-courses, and seamed and scarred by the volcanic struggles which had been going on below the surface for a thousand centuries perhaps. In the half-dark of evening, as the schooner, fearing to enter the lagoon without a better light, brought up outside the reef, it looked bleak and cheerless enough to have daunted the soul of the bravest son of man.

To Claude there was a sort of grim fascination about the island lying so still and cold across the stretch of water. Even Loie seemed to be impressed by it, for she was more silent than was usual with her. They stood watching it until darkness descended and they could see it no longer. Then Claude shuddered and turned away. He had still enough of the old leaven left to wish that events had made it possible for him to have acted otherwise than he was doing.

The meal that night in the little cabin was an unusually silent one, and as soon as it was over Claude went on deck. He had not been there many minutes before the moon rose above the mountain-peaks ashore, round as a half-crown piece, and yellow as a sovereign, and flooded the scene with her mellow light. Saving the thunder of the surf upon the reef, the wearing noise made by the cable in the hawse hole, and the subdued voices of the crew seated in the bows, there

was not a sound to be heard. Presently Loie came on deck and joined him. Slipping her little arm through his as he leant against the bulwarks, she asked him about his thoughts.

"I have been thinking of the work we are going to undertake to-morrow," he answered. Then turning suddenly to her he said—

"Loie, there is still time for you to turn back. Will you do it? The schooner will convey you to Honolulu, and I will see that your future is well provided for. I have discovered that I am a coward, and I cannot let you make this sacrifice."

"Claude," she answered, with unwonted seriousness, "it is useless for you to talk of my turning back now. You know very well that I will not do so. Where you go I will go. 'Your people shall be my people.' And if we are to live and die upon that island—well, we will live and die together. While you love me I will never leave you."

"But think, Loie," he said, feeling that he was arguing against his own desire. "Supposing you were to contract the disease? What should I do then?"

"Do as I should do if you were to take it—nurse you well again. But, Claude, why are you talking like this? You know very well that my mind is made up. In other things I may be foolish, but in this my resolve is not to be shaken. Now let us talk about something else."

Claude said no more on the subject, but he was not by any means happy in his mind. When Loie was tired he went below to spend the greater part of the

night in prayer for guidance and help in his new work. Ever since the storm upon the island, described in the last chapter, he had been a changed being as far as his belief went. Always, in a sense, a superstitious man, he was now religious almost to fanaticism. He believed himself the one person of all the others in the world chosen by God to carry help to these outcasts, and it was to the sincerity and firmness of that belief that he owed the facility with which he had been able to put his old life and its attendant comforts behind him so easily.

When he did go to bed his thoughts went back to Marcia. In the light of his present enthusiasm he seemed to be able to see her character more clearly, to be able to understand why she had taken such a stand against him. Poor Marcia! He wondered what she was doing at that moment, and whether she would ever come to hear of his sacrifice. If she did, what would she think of it? And how would she reconcile his action with the sentiments she had imputed to the author of "God's Microcosms"?

His preparations for the work upon which he was going to engage himself had been as complete as it had been possible for him to make them. Prior to leaving the island he had visited the schooner *Maid of Orkney*, anchored in the lagoon, and had interviewed his friend the mate. The skipper was still in his strait-waistcoat in the house, and as Claude had clambered over the port bulwark and gained the deck he heard him raving in his delirium. Taking the mate on one side he entrusted to his care a telegram and a

letter. The letter was addressed to a firm of chemists in Sydney, the telegram to Vincent Lee. The first contained a request that the firm in question would at once dispatch to Manila, addressed to him, the articles contained in the list he enclosed. In his telegram to Lee he made him aware of the resolve he had come to, and implored him to advise him by return of post as to the course he should pursue in his treatment of the wretched beings with whom he was about to cast his lot. In the time that had elapsed since they had parted, Lee's reputation had grown by leaps and bounds, and now his researches and opinions had a value considerably in advance of his years. It looked as if Fate had drawn the two men together for mutual help.

The sun had been half an hour above the horizon next morning when Claude reached the deck. A long, steady swell was rolling in towards the land, breaking in a line of creamy foam upon the reef. The tops of the mountains were cloaked with cloud, in contrast to which the ravines showed black and awesome. A few shore birds and half a dozen white gulls were the only signs of life that met his eye. He leant upon the bulwarks and studied his future home. What did it hold for him? The roll of destiny seemed to echo in the thunder of the surf upon the reef. And as if in proof that God's hand had directed him thither, while he watched a brilliant light was thrown by the sun upon the clouds that hid the mountain-peaks. He took it as a good omen, and turned to go below again. By seven o'clock the skipper had taken advantage of the

tide's serving, and manœuvred the schooner through the passage into the lagoon. Once at anchor there, they breakfasted, and then the baggage was brought on deck ready for the boat which was to convey it to the island.

As soon as the boat contained as much as she could safely carry she was pulled ashore and unloaded on the beach beside a grove of palm-trees.

So far Claude had seen none of the inhabitants. But he was to do so before long.

He had just carried his tool-chest from the boat and placed it beyond the reach of the water, when he heard a rustling in the bushes in front of him and looked up. Gazing at him from among the leaves was something which compelled him to recoil with a cry. It was certainly a face, but one so disfigured and distorted by disease that he could hardly believe it belonged to a human body. As he looked, a hand appeared and parted the branches that screened the body from view. Next moment a man, or the semblance of one, made his appearance and came down the bank. When he was within a dozen paces of Claude he seated himself on a boulder and prepared for conversation. Claude noticed, to his surprise, that he was a white man, and that when he spoke he did so with some show of education.

"Good morning!" he said, with a sort of sarcastic politeness. "If you will not consider it an impertinent question, who the devil may you be?"

Claude had been prepared for horrible sights, but somehow he had not expected to find his own country-

men among the sufferers. He furnished the other with his assumed name, which for many reasons he had resolved not to dispense with, and then he inquired if his things would be safe where he had put them upon the beach. The man on the boulder eyed the heap before he spoke.

"I see no liquor," he said. "So they will be perfectly safe. If you had any spirits I should probably steal it myself. But truck of that kind is of no earthly use to me. What have you brought it for?"

"To build a hut with," replied Claude. "And now, one other question. You know the island, probably you can recommend me a good spot to set about my work."

"Your hut? You don't mean to tell me you're coming ashore to live?"

"That is my intention."

"You don't look like a leper. But then, perhaps you have committed a crime?"

"I am neither a leper nor a criminal."

This time it was the other's turn to be astonished.

"You're not a leper, and you're not a runaway from gaol, and yet you come to Vaamoa! There's only one other thing left. You must be mad."

"I don't think I'm mad either."

"Then what the deuce have you come for?"

"To try to be of some service to those like yourself who are here."

The other laughed as uproariously as his condition would allow him. Then he stopped suddenly and eyed Claude cunningly.

"So you've come to play the *rôle* of St. Francis Xavier, have you? Ha! ha! I've not heard such a joke since I said goodbye to the world myself. My friend, what do you think lies before you?"

"Service to those who are here, I hope," said Claude.

"Good! Good! Very good! You need go no further, my dear sir. I appoint you my *valet de chambre* this instant. Remember, you are appropriated. You may bring up my shaving water to-morrow at eight."

The natives waiting in the boat for Claude looked from one to the other and wondered. What did it all mean? They were far from liking the look of the white man upon the boulder, and were anxious to get back to the schooner without delay.

"Is there any little comfort I can bring you ashore from the schooner?" asked Claude. "If it is in my power I should be very glad to do so."

"A thousand things; but one will suffice," returned the other. "Since you are so accommodating, I should like some rum for my own personal drinking—not to be shared with the dogs up yonder. I am tired of ki—you can get drunk on it, certainly, but it's not a pleasant intoxication, and when I've taken it I always feel as if I shall never be properly happy until I've murdered somebody. You'll bring the rum?"

"I'm afraid I could not do that," said Claude quietly. "It would not be a good beginning for either of us."

On hearing this the other replied with a volley of oaths.

"How do you know what's good for me?" he cried. "The devil fly off with you and your cant. I'll have none of it. Don't you come here snivelling and prying, or you'll find yourself pitched out, and very quickly, too. Bring the rum, or stay away."

This was not a promising beginning, Claude thought to himself, as he took his place in his boat, and was once more pulled out to the schooner.

When he returned with his next load the leper was still there, seated on his boulder as before. He did not speak, however, but seemed sunk in a sort of torpor.

By midday Claude had got all his belongings ashore, and nothing remained but for Loie and himself to bid those on board the schooner goodbye. Before he left, however, Claude had a piece of business to undertake. Approaching his skipper, he led him to the taffrail.

"Martin," he said, "the end of our voyage has come, and now we are going ashore. You have been a good servant to me, and, as I shall never require her again, I am going to reward you by making you a present of this vessel and all she contains. You will find a letter on the table downstairs to that effect. I wish you good luck with her."

Martin was too surprised at the suddenness and generosity of the gift to be able for a moment to say anything. When he recovered himself he cried—

"But how will you get away from here yourself, sir?"

"I shall never come away," said Claude.

"Never come away?" answered Martin incredulously.

"But surely, sir, you and your good lady are not going to live for ever among them poor devils ashore there?"

"That is our intention."

The captain stared at him in complete amazement for nearly a minute.

"You're going to live among them lepers?" he said, slowly, as if trying to gauge the importance of every word. "It can't be true. Are you aware of the sort of place it is, sir? And do you know that it is possible that one of you may catch it yourselves?"

"If God so wills that we do, it is not our place to repine."

"But I can't believe it, sir."

"Perhaps not, Martin. But still, you see, it is a fact. And now we must be getting ashore."

Martin only shook his head. He had been at sea for something like fifty years, and in the whole of his career he had never heard of such a foolhardy thing before. Then it suddenly struck him that he had not thanked his employer for his generous gift. He proceeded to do so at some length. Claude, however, cut him short. Time was pressing, and he had much to do before darkness fell.

But the skipper was not to be baulked so easily. He felt it was his duty to try to persuade the other against taking such a step.

"Mr. Riversdale," he said, "I don't like the idea of what you're going to do at all. Surely, sir, as I said just now, you're not aware of the character of that place ashore, or you wouldn't be taking your good lady to it."

"I am quite aware, Martin," Claude replied, "and so is she. We know that our duty lies there, and, God helping us, we are going to do it. Now, one last request. I have just given you this schooner, but I want you to do something for me in return. I sent off a letter from the old island to a firm in Sydney, asking that some cases of medical comforts might be sent to Honolulu addressed to me. On the table in the cabin you will find a paper authorising you to receive them in my name. I want you to take charge of them and bring them here with the utmost despatch; also any letters or telegrams that may be lying at the post-office addressed to me. If you will do that, you are free thenceforward to do as you please with the craft."

"I will do it at once, and with pleasure," said Martin. "In the meantime, sir, I should like to tell you what I think of the sacrifice you and your good lady are making for them poor fellows yonder."

"Hush, Martin," said Claude. "It would be better if you said nothing on the subject. Keep a silent tongue in your head, for my sake. Now goodbye."

Martin took Claude's hand, and as he did so he removed his hat. Then he bade them both farewell, and watched them go down the gangway to the boat.

As they were rowed ashore Claude held Loie's hand in his. She was very pale, and he could feel that she was trembling. Reaching the beach, they sprang out, and for the last time Claude assisted the crew to unpack the boat. The leper had vanished, and when Claude saw this he felt relieved.

From the deck of the schooner he had decided upon

a little plateau on the mountain-side as the place where he would build his hut, and accordingly, as soon as he was ashore, he bade the crew carry up to it the tool-chest and the boards he had brought with him. They dug holes for the supporting posts, and when these had been erected, and the rest of his belongings carried up, Claude rewarded them liberally and despatched them back to the schooner.

Their martyrdom had now commenced.

All the afternoon they laboured together on the construction of the hut, working with feverish energy that they might not have time to think. High above them towered the mountain, the slope covered with wild ginger, Ki, and yellow hibiscus-trees; below was the leper village, and across the reef the blue Pacific slowly heaving in the soft evening light.

At last, after infinite exertion, the frame of the hut was completed and the roof was ready for thatching—a work which would necessitate grass being cut and binding stakes prepared. This could not be done without daylight. In the meantime a tarpaulin would afford a sufficient shelter for the night. At the side of the house a cooking place was erected of large stones, and by the time this work was completed dusk had fallen.

Claude had just gone inside their new home, and was arranging it as far as possible for Loie's comfort, when he heard his companion, who was at the cooking place outside, utter a cry. Throwing down his hammer, he ran to see what was the matter.

He found Loie leaning against the wall, her face

white with terror, and sitting on a stump opposite her, steadfastly regarding her, the same leper whose acquaintance he had made that morning. Claude went over to Loie and put his arm round her.

"You mustn't be frightened, dear," he said soothingly. "This poor fellow is one of the unfortunates we have come to help. You must try and grow accustomed to them."

Then, with his arm still around her, he turned to the man on the stump and said—

"One caution, my friend. For all our sakes, it is only proper that we should be careful. I shall be pleased to see you up here whenever you care to come, provided you do not on any account come closer than you are now."

"So you are afraid, are you?" said the leper, still looking at Loie. "Well, perhaps you are right. But when all's said and done, what a villain you must be to bring this woman here! If you could have seen how they carry on in the village down yonder when they've been drinking ki, you'd have left her behind. Oh, it's a glorious place in the season, is Vaamoä—there's not a fashionable watering-place in England to compare with it—only it has no church parade on Sundays. I've been here a year, and I don't know what month it is, or even the day of the week. Days, weeks, and months are all alike. Years we don't reckon at all; because few of us see more than three."

"Poor fellow!" said Loie softly. "We will see if we can't make you happier now that we have come."

"Happier?" cried the other. "How can we ever be

happier? You don't understand. But you will when you have seen the village down below to-morrow. Ho! ho! I shall enjoy that. The only enjoyment left me is watching the sufferings of others, and you'll both be——"

"Stop!" said Claude sternly. "If you talk like that I shall not let you come here at all. I want you to be a help to me, not a hindrance. God has sent us here to do what we can to relieve the misery that exists, and we shall do our duty—if not with your help, then without it. But I think your own common sense will counsel you to throw in your lot with us."

"You don't know the people with whom you have to deal," returned the other. "If you had seen as much of them as I have, you wouldn't talk so confidently. It's not the vice which will beat you, it's the apathy—the dull, senseless stupor—that is the hardest thing to overcome. When a man can sit still and see his leg cooking on the fire and never take the trouble to move it, he is not the sort of man to worry much about the squalor of his surroundings. Look at me. You may not think it, but I once held a commission in one of her Majesty's crack cavalry regiments, and married one of the beauties of a London season. My father sits in the Commons to this day—or did when I last heard of him. Now look at the other side of the picture. Do you think I worry myself because I don't get sugar in my tea, because I have to wear pyjamas like this instead of a frock-coat? But I'd give my soul in exchange for a brandy-soda, such as I used to get at the dear old Rag."

The man rose to his feet and prepared to hobble away.

"You will come up in the morning," said Loie quietly, "and let us see what we can do for you?"

"You are very kind," answered the other, with a grotesque attempt at his old manner. "I shall be very glad to do so if I feel equal to the walk. Generally, I lie in the sun on the beach and imagine myself once more at home. Now I really think I must be going." Then, with an outburst of mock politeness, he added, "Good evening, and good dreams to you."

"Good evening," answered Claude. Loie, however, noticing how ill-clad he was, went into the hut, to reappear a moment later with a travelling rug.

"If this will be any use to you," she said, "I hope you will please me by taking it."

"Your kindness really overpowers me," returned the poor wretch, and then, wrapping the rug about him, he attempted to raise his dilapidated hat, failed to do so, and went down the hillside muttering to himself.

After they had cooked and eaten their evening meal, Claude and Loie sat outside. The night was as still as the day had been. In the distance they could hear the roar of the surf, and now and again a voice travelling up the hillside from the village below. Overhead the stars shone brightly, as only stars in those latitudes can, but above the summit of the mountain they were paling, preparatory to the rising of the moon.

"When will Mr. Lee receive your telegram?" asked Loie, who had been silent for some time.

"Within forty-eight hours of the arrival of the *Maid of Orkney* in Sydney."

"And do you think he will send the necessary things out to you at once?"

"As soon as he can get them together, I am certain. I told him it was a matter of life and death."

"Hark! what was that?"

Both listened, and an instant later a little cry came up the hillside.

"It sounds like a child in distress," cried Claude, springing to his feet. "Stay here; I will go and see."

"I must come with you," said Loie. "I could not be left alone—I should die of fright."

By this time the moon was high above the mountain, and the whole island was bathed in its mellow light. Hand in hand, Loie and Claude picked their way down the hillside among the rocks and bushes, pausing every few moments to listen for the cry. At last they heard it quite distinctly to their left, and a walk of a few yards showed them what it was. In the middle of the little open space upon which they stood, and at the base of a large boulder, lay the body of a little child in the last stage of the disease. Fortunately, whatever strength it may once have had to utter the cries which had brought Claude and Loie to his assistance was now gone, and kindly Death had put an end to its sufferings. Claude knelt down and examined the body as closely as he could without touching it. He was in the act of rising to his feet again when he heard a low laugh, and turned to see, sitting on the ground a few paces from them, the same individual with whom they had already come in contact.

"I feel quite interested," he said. "On the way

down from your hut I heard this child crying and stopped to see what you would do."

"How did it come here?" cried Loie, feeling that her wrath was rising.

"Its mother carried it here and left it. The child was dying, and its body interfered with the hula dancing down below."

"And you stayed to watch it perish without coming to tell us? Oh, shame upon you! Shame! Can you call yourself a man?"

"Not exactly," replied the man. "A leper would be nearer the mark, perhaps."

Loie was furious, but Claude made no remark. He was kneeling by his first dead body, praying with all his soul to God.

"I might have come up to tell you, certainly," said the man, after a few moments' pause, "for I owe you for this rug. But it meant a climb up the hill, and I knew that the youngster would be better dead. So I did not bother. You have now had a practical illustration of what I meant when I said this afternoon that apathy will be the hardest foe you will have to fight."

Claude had risen to his feet. Taking Loie's arm, he led her away, but as he went he turned to the man, who was still sitting on the ground shivering in his rug, and asked him if the body might be safely left where it was till morning.

The man laughed in the same horrible fashion as he had done when Claude had first told him the reason of his coming to the island.

"Quite safe," he answered. "You need not be

afraid of any one taking the trouble to touch him. The mother is probably drunk on ki by this time, and the father is almost moribund. Listen to that."

Claude listened, and from the huts on the slope, just below the plateau on which they were standing, came up the noise of drunken revelry.

"Go to the edge and look over," said the other man.

Claude went, and, parting the bushes, looked down. The moonlight was bright as day, and he could see the open space between the huts distinctly. A few moments later he was back by Loie's side, leading her up the hill as fast as he could go. If they had not been in the shadow of a grove of palms she would have noticed that his face was as white as the body of the child they had just left. He had seen a sight that made him feel sick nearly unto death.

When they reached the hut he stood for a moment with her beside the door. It seemed as if he were trying to make up his mind to do something that would cut his heart in two.

"Loie," he said at last, and his voice was thick and almost guttural with the intensity of his emotion, "I have something to say to you that I know will distress you greatly. But come what will, it must be said. I am going to ask you to let me touch your hand and kiss your lips now for the last time in my life."

"My God, Claude!" she cried. "What do you mean?"

"I mean what I say, Loie," he answered. "Henceforward, save that I can see you, and help you, and speak with you, I must be as a dead man in your eyes."

From to-morrow until God takes me I shall be amongst the poor wretches down yonder—dressing their wounds, touching their sores, living with them if need be. To kiss you, or even to touch you then, might be to give you the disease. I cannot do that, and I cannot draw back from my duty. This is why I am going to make my sacrifice even more complete in God's eyes than before."

Loie was looking across the moonlit sea with a face like the Death of which he spoke.

"You wrong me," she answered softly. "I should not care if you did give it me. Besides, I shall go about among them too. The mere fact that you do not kiss me will not prevent my catching it."

Claude did not reveal the scheme that he was cherishing in his heart.

"Kiss me, Loie, for the last time," he said. "And for pity's sake do not tempt me. God knows that I love you better than life itself. In the past we have sinned, but God is merciful and has given us a chance to retrieve our error. Let us both be brave, and do our duty. You will occupy this hut; to-morrow I shall build myself another on the other side of the plateau."

"But to-night, Claude?"

"To-night I shall sleep, if sleep is possible, beneath that palm. Kiss me, Loie."

Seeing that he was desperately in earnest she raised her white face to his and let him kiss her. Then kneeling at her feet, he raised and kissed the hem of her dress.

"Loie, Loie," he murmured so softly that she could barely hear him, "through all eternity you will be my only love."

After which, picking up a rug and a pillow from a heap inside the hut, he crossed the plateau and placed them beneath a palm. Then, dropping on to his knees, he offered up his heart to God.

"O God in heaven," he prayed, "show mercy and have regard to this my sacrifice. Thou knowest it is for her sake I plead. For her I ask forgiveness. Merciful Father, I am not worthy to approach Thy throne, but forgive her all her trespasses."

CHAPTER XVIII

AN OFFER OF HELP

Claude and Leo had been a month upon the island, and the thirty days had seemed to both a lifetime. It was not long before the former discovered that even the ghastly stories he had been told in olden days by traders and others concerning Vaamoa, and which he had felt inclined at the time to disbelieve, were really nothing as compared with the horrors of the place. Such were his own personal experiences in his first twenty-four hours' explorations, that ever since that time he had positively refused to allow Loie to visit the village on any pretext whatever. Even he himself was at times compelled to leave the huts in order to ascend the hillside and draw a few breaths of pure air. It was almost impossible to believe that human beings could have fallen so low. Law, order, and the very commonest rules of decency were totally disregarded. To the horrible issues of the disease the wretched victims had added drunkenness and immorality of every sort and description, seeming to take a positive delight in the degradation to which they had brought themselves. To every feeling of friendship or kinship their hearts were deadened. No attention of any kind was bestowed upon those who could not help themselves;

the dying were cast out of the huts to breathe their last uncared for, and in most cases unthought of, while the dead were allowed to remain just where they died, without any attempt being made at burial.

The population of the island consisted of one Englishman, the man Stephens already referred to, a couple of dozen half-caste Spaniards, a dozen Europeans of different nationalities, fifty or sixty Caroline Islanders, the same number of Chamorros or aborigines, and a baker's dozen or so of other South Sea Islanders generally. In spite of his first disgust, Claude soon came to feel a great pity for the wretched beings. On their side they regarded him with considerable suspicion and no small amount of wonder. They could not understand why a white man not afflicted with the disease should come among them, and they suspected some further trick on the part of the Government, who had taken them from their homes. It was not until he had been on the island a month, and they had had repeated opportunities of convincing themselves that his motives were honest, that they gave him any real sign of their appreciation. Then this took the form of accepting his gifts without any expression of gratitude, and stealing his belongings the instant his back was turned. It was a long and uphill fight against the overwhelming odds of apathy and vice, and again and again his heart felt almost hopeless of success as he realised how great were his efforts and how small his success. Still, however, he pushed on with a dogged patience that was born of despair, feeling that God was behind him and

that with every victory won the salvation of Loie's soul was a little more assured.

His first business had been to win the confidence of the least afflicted of the male population, and when he had done that to induce them to assist in the building of better huts. For a fortnight he laboured day in, day out, sometimes helped, but oftener working alone, and at the end of that time, after disappointments too numerous to mention, he had the satisfaction of seeing the population transferred to new and more sanitary abodes. The next work was to destroy by fire the old dwellings, and then to inaugurate a series of rules for regulating the public health. Here, for the first time, he met the full force of that terrible apathy against which the unfortunate Englishman Stephens had warned him when he had at first arrived upon the island. To put his people into new dwellings was a matter of no difficulty, but to induce them to pay any attention to matters involving a little personal inconvenience was quite another. He expostulated, pleaded, threatened, but all in vain. So he left them in despair and went up to consult with Loie.

"What did I tell you?" said Stephens, who followed him about continually, and now met him on the hillside. "You'll never do it. They'll promise as often as you like, but they won't perform. I warned you of that a month ago. Will you take another bit of advice?"

"What is it?"

"Go away. Leave us. Let us fall back into our old tracks. We're not worth the trouble; and you seem to

forget that the worse we become the sooner we shall die, and our misery be ended. You've done your best to pull us out of the mire, but you'll never make any headway if you live to be a hundred. And suppose you do, what will you gain by it?"

"I have no wish to gain anything for myself," replied Claude, with a sort of hazy conviction that he was not altogether speaking the truth.

"Then more fool you to come," said Stephens abruptly. "I wish I had your chance of going away. As it is, I shall die here like a dog, and nobody will care or be a bit the wiser. If I had the pluck I'd throw myself over the cliff there. But I haven't—so I die by inches."

"Hush! hush! you mustn't talk in this fashion."

"And why not? Man, just look at me and tell me if you can find it in your heart to say that you don't think I should be better dead. Remember what I was once, and see what I am now. What I shall be later on you dare not think. Is there another man in the world more wretched, do you think?"

"You know very well that I pity you from the bottom of my heart," said Claude, putting his hand on the other's shoulder. "And if I could help you I would give anything to do so."

"Ah! You talk very fine, but it's easy to talk. Nobody knows that better than I."

"If you do not think I wish to help you," said Claude, "why do you suppose I am here?"

The other looked at him craftily.

"I can hazard a very good guess," he said, and

declined to say any more. Claude questioned him, but he only answered with another of his horrible laughs, and went his way down the hillside. The other continued his walk till he reached the plateau upon which Loie's hut stood. Arriving there, he waited on the furthest edge and called to her according to his custom. Presently she came out.

"I have been expecting you all the morning," she said a little pettishly. "I have wanted you so bad. Where have you been?"

"I have been down at the hospital," he answered, referring to a building he had been at work upon ever since he had finished the huts. It was intended for the reception of those unfortunates whose ends were approaching, and who could not receive proper attention in their own huts.

"It is always the hospital, Claude," she answered. "You're slaving there day and night, wearing yourself out. I see nothing of you, and it is so lonely up here. Why will you never let me do a thing to help you?"

"You must not be angry with me, dear," he answered. "The building is on the verge of completion, and to-morrow should see it finished. You must not grudge my labour. Think what a boon it will be to our little colony when it is in use."

Loie came a little closer. She looked very lovely in her simple nurse's dress.

"Claude," she said softly, "you see how selfish I am, after all. I prefer having you with me, even to allowing you to do good work for the people down yonder.

When I see how much you deny yourself, and how good you are, I feel as if I could kneel down and worship you."

"You mustn't say that, Loie," he answered simply. "It is only by God's grace that I am able to work as I do, and even this morning I had still sufficient of the old leaven in me to be angry because the poor folk would not comply with my rules and regulations. How I wish the schooner would come with her stores! I am beginning to grow anxious about her. She should have been her three days ago."

"You must not worry about her," Loie replied. "She is certain to be here in a day or two. And now one other question, Claude. When am I to be allowed to begin my work? As I said just now, I am sick to death idling my days up here. Remember, you promised that I should help you."

Claude had been dreading this question, but now that it had been put it behooved him to answer it in the way he had intended.

"Loie," he said, with a little diffidence, "I have been thinking it over, and have come to the conclusion that I cannot let you remain here. The mere thought that you may incur this hideous disease haunts me, waking and sleeping; I cannot rid myself of it, and I find that it makes me neglectful of the work I ought to do. For this reason, alone, Loie, I have been keeping you up here, hoping that when Martin and the schooner put in an appearance I may be able to induce you to return to civilisation in her."

Loie made a little gesture of impatience. Claude looked at her and saw that tears were in her eyes.

"It is unkind," she said, "to treat me like a child. I have told you over and over again, Claude, that I will not be sent away from you. My work lies with you, and come what may I am going to do it. If you deceive me again I shall cease to respect you."

"But, Loie——"

"I will have no 'buts,' " she cried impetuously. "I will have my work to do. I will not go away."

"You are very wilful, and you are also a little cruel to me. If you only knew the agony I suffer when I even see any of my poor people near this hut, I feel sure you would not condemn me to it."

"I cannot help it, Claude; I cannot leave you. And you must not ask me to do so. I should never know an instant's happiness if I went away. It would be too dreadful."

Loie came still closer and tried to take his hand.

"Claude, my own dear love," she said, with all the softness of which her voice was capable, "when I ask you from the bottom of my heart to let me bear my share of your labour here how can you refuse me? You said once that it was your chance of heaven. May I not have my chance, too? You can see that I am in earnest. Try to forget, then, that there is any risk, and let me work with you at what you are doing."

"Do you mean it, Loie?"

"I mean it, so help me God," she answered, with supreme earnestness. "Let me be with you, and you could not make me happier. I only want to be by your side—to be labouring at the same task. Come, Claude, will you consent?"

Claude saw she meant every syllable she uttered.

"If you're so set upon it there is nothing for me, I suppose, but to consent," he answered, and the words seemed to ring his death-knell.

"I thank you," she answered humbly; and so the matter was finally settled.

All the afternoon Claude was busily occupied thatching the hospital. It was a fine building, the largest in the township, and had taken an incredible amount of labour and material. It contained three rooms, each of which was capable of holding six beds; the walls were slabs, the floor of earth, beaten hard, and the roof of thatch. By nightfall it was almost completed, and at most a couple of hours' work on the morrow would make it ready to receive its occupants. As the sun was setting over the sea he stood with Loie before it, and as they regarded it he felt proud of his handiwork. Descending the little slope upon which it stood they entered the village, followed by a little leper boy named Mallata, who had from the very first taken an extraordinary fancy to Claude.

It struck them both that this evening the village was unusually quiet, and that such of the inhabitants as they met did not regard them with their customary confident air. Claude was too busy, however, thinking of his labour on the morrow and of the good work he would be able to accomplish when the schooner should bring him the stores he needed, and the hospital should be furnished, to wonder very much at it.

Arriving at his hut, he bade Loie goodbye, and was about to go inside when he heard the sound

of a cough behind him, and turned to see who uttered it.

"Why, Mallata," he cried cheerily to the native, seeing that it was the same urchin who had followed him through the village, "what does this mean? Is there no poi down yonder to-night that you follow me up here?"

The little fellow eyed him wistfully. He was palpably struggling with some emotion that prevented him from giving free utterance to his thoughts. Claude repeated his question, and this time he answered—

"Not poi," he said; then, with significant emphasis, "but all same plenty of ki me think."

Claude pricked up his ears. He had expected something of the sort from the behaviour of the people.

"Mallata," he said, "can you tell me who makes this wretched ki, that eats up the hearts of the men and makes them go mad?"

It is made in the house of Tomas of Niihan," said the little chap, without a second's thought, rolling his dark eyes at Claude as he spoke.

"Very well," said Claude, to himself, "then to-morrow I will deal with Tomas of Niihan so that he will sin no more." Then aloud, "Remain where you are, little man, and I will give you food."

After this frugal evening meal had been eaten Claude went across to Loie's hut. He found her sitting before her door sewing. The night was dark, and a fine breeze was blowing.

For nearly an hour they sat talking. Then Claude

rose to return to his own abode. As he did so a sound of shouting came up from the beach, and a moment later a bright tongue of flame leapt up into the dark night.

"They are drinking ki again," said Claude impatiently. "And now a hut is on fire; I must go down to them."

"I will come with you," said Loie.

After their conversation that morning Claude did not attempt to stop her, and together they made their way down to the village. Higher and higher the tongues of flame were leaping into the air, and at a considerable distance the sound of crackling timber could be distinctly heard.

On leaving the trees that had hitherto hid the village from their sight, they were presented with a clear view of the conflagration. And when he saw where it was, Claude could hardly believe his eyes. The house on fire was none other than his brand-new hospital—the building that was to be ready to receive his patients on the morrow.

By the time he reached it, all hope of saving it was past and gone. The whole front was ablaze, and suspicious columns of smoke were already going up from the rooms at the rear. Sitting at safe distances on either side were groups of natives calmly regarding the conflagration, but when Claude questioned them they one and all expressed entire ignorance as to the means which had caused it.

Claude gazed at the devouring flames, and as he did so he for a moment lost his temper. It was worse

than provoking, after his weeks of wearisome labour, to have his whole work undone in a few moments. But as he was powerless to do anything towards punishing the guilty, even if he could have discovered them, he felt there was nothing to be gained by a display of wrath. So he turned to Loie, who was standing beside him, and said quietly—

“Let us be going back, dear; it is no use our remaining to watch it burn. To-morrow I must set to work and build another.”

“My poor Claude, I am so very sorry,” she said, seeing his bitter disappointment. “It seems too hard that all your work and trouble should be wasted like this. Do you think it was set on fire on purpose?”

“I have no possible means of judging; but one thing is very evident, and that is, for all our sakes I must find the makers of and stop the supply of ki manufactured on the island. It is killing the population.”

In accordance with his resolution, the following morning, as soon as it was light, Claude went down to the village, and made his way to the house of Tomas of Niihan. He was fully aware of the consequences likely to ensue from what he was about to do. He knew that a certain amount of odium would accrue to him, but to benefit the people in general he was willing to risk that. None of those whom the world has been pleased to call heroes ever reached their goal without incurring the displeasure of somebody.

Reaching the hut, which stood on a little eminence on the outskirts of the village, he walked inside, and called for the owner. A sleepy grunt from one of the

corners was the sole response. He tracked the sound, and found Tomas of Niihan stretched out upon his mat, fast asleep. He had been a finely built, powerful fellow before the disease had laid hands upon him; now he had fallen away to a shadow.

Claude called him again by name, and finding this did not rouse him, shook him till he opened his eyes. If he felt any surprise at seeing his visitor he did not show it.

"Get up, Tomas," said Claude sternly, "and give me the things with which you make this ki."

It was some time before the other could grasp what was meant, but when he did he absolutely refused to comply with the demand made upon him. Claude thereupon gave him notice that he intended to search for what he wanted, and forthwith passed out of the hut and round to a smaller one at the back. Here he found all that he required, and taking the implements in his arms, in spite of the owner's protest, set off down the path again towards the village square. By the time he arrived there the whole population able to move about had assembled to witness what was going to happen.

Placing the bowls and other vessels on the ground, Claude spoke for a few minutes on the evil effects of the spirit in the manufacture of which they were used. Then, before their eyes, he raised the hammer he had put in his pocket for that purpose, and pounded every one of the utensils to atoms. As he did so an angry groan went up from the crowd, and many of the dusky faces round him, particularly those whose owners

boasted Spanish blood, scowled savagely at him. But no one interfered.

Having finished his work of destruction he spoke to them again for a few moments, and then prepared to return to his abode for breakfast.

As he went away he happened to glance out to sea. To his surprise and delight a schooner was approaching the break in the reef. He would have known it anywhere for his own boat. He hurried up the hill to tell Loie, and then together they went down to the beach. By the time they reached it, the *Water Witch* had entered the lagoon and dropped her anchor opposite the village. Ten minutes later Captain Martin had lowered a boat, and was making his way ashore.

As he landed Claude and Loie approached the water's edge to receive him. Martin eyed them both with evident curiosity, and a small amount of apprehension.

"I'm afraid I'm a bit behind time, sir," he said; "but it wasn't exactly my fault. The English mail hadn't come in, and then there was one thing and another to attend to—papers to sign and what not—such as there always is in these 'ere Spanish ports. Howsomever, I'm here at last, and I've brought your stores, and this packet of telegrams and letters for you."

As he spoke he handed a bundle to Claude.

"Thank you, Martin," said the latter. "We've been expecting you for the past few days, but that hardly matters since you've come at last? And now, what about getting the stores ashore?"

"It shall be done at once, sir. I'll see to it myself. I'd have brought them with me now, but I thought maybe you'd like to have your letters first."

"You were quite right. And now that I've got them I think I'll look into them while you're getting aboard again. What sort of a voyage did you have?"

"Al, sir, and no mistake. Splendid winds and splendid weather. But you and your good lady, sir, are lookin' a sight too thin and pale to please me. The place doesn't suit you, sir."


"I haven't time to think about that. Now, Martin, be off for the stores, if you don't mind. I'm all impatience to have them ashore."

As soon as the boat was on its way back to the schooner Claude and Loie sat down on the beach, and the former opened the telegram lying on the top of the bundle. As he expected, it was from Lee. It contained only ten words, and ran as follows:—

"Have started to come to you. Think cure discovered.
LEE."

In those few words he saw all the affection of the lad he had rescued, for himself. He handed the paper to Loie without a word. Somehow he felt as if he could have put his head down on his hands and wept for very gratitude.

Before nightfall the entire village was aware that a doctor was coming across the seas to succour them.



CHAPTER XIX

A CHAPTER OF ACCIDENTS

Two months and a fortnight had elapsed since the schooner had brought to the island Lee's telegram announcing the fact of his coming to their assistance. During the whole of that period of waiting Claude had not been idle for a second, and as a result he was able to assure himself he made considerable headway, not only in the good graces of his people, but in the preparations for the doctor's advent. His hospital had been entirely rebuilt, and for something like a month Loie had been installed as matron in it. The settlement by this time was composed entirely of new huts, every one raised above the ground to avoid the damp, and however small might be the amount of gratitude shown by the inhabitants for the boon, it was at least beyond doubt that they appreciated the change.

The news of the English doctor's coming had spread like wildfire, and there was hardly a heart but was animated with some hope of a cure. Claude, however, had been careful to explain to them that it would be impossible for his friend to reach the island under two months, and that it would behoove them to patiently await his coming. He himself, though he tried hard not to show it, was scarcely less anxious than they.

Every time he looked upon the distorted faces of those about him he became more and more desirous of seeing the sails of the boat that was to bring them relief.

But a disappointment was in store for them. Day after day went by and still no sign of the boat put in an appearance. Every morning prior to descending to their labours Claude and Loie walked to the top of the headland and scoured the sea for it. But their vigilance was never rewarded. It was now three weeks overdue, and the grumbling of the unfortunates in the settlement below was growing louder and louder with each succeeding day. Claude began to see what a difficulty he had raised up for himself, and from that time forward he deeply regretted his want of foresight in having ever shared his secret with them. One thing was very evident: if Lee did not arrive very soon his people would begin to suspect him of playing false with them. In that case the influence he had managed to obtain over them would soon be undermined, and what the next step would be it would be impossible to foretell. To folk situated as they were such a serious disappointment might end in anything.

To add to his anxiety, Loie had of late not been at all well. Her appetite had vanished; she complained of severe headaches, and of feeling feverish at night. Her face had grown very pale, and her eyes had dark circles under them that frightened Claude more and more every time he noticed them. He had prescribed for her times out of number, but his physic seemed to do her little or no good. She needed complete rest, but nothing he could say would induce her to take it. She

laboured on, from morning till night, nursing, comforting, soothing, and oftentimes even chiding, as if nothing at all were the matter. To Claude the change in her character was almost bewildering. In face and voice she was still the same Loie whom he remembered so passionate and wilful, and yet in character how widely different she was! When he watched her moving about among the poor wretches in the village, and saw her slaving from morning till night amid the most repulsive surroundings, never thinking of herself at all, working only for the good of others, and realised that she had undertaken it all without enthusiasm, merely for love of him, he felt that there was some power at work within her greater than he was capable of understanding.

Still the days went by, and still no sign came of the man whose arrival was so eagerly expected. Every morning Claude had to answer the inquiries of the township with a negative, and of late it had seemed to him that his reception was growing less and less cordial every day. He felt that if the vessel with Lee on board did not soon put in an appearance another week might see anything happen.

On the evening of the hundredth day dating from the arrival of the telegram announcing Lee's coming, he was climbing the hill to his hut feeling more miserable than he had ever done in his life before. A great terror had laid its hand upon him. Loie had not been well since she got up, she had been growing worse all day, and when towards the middle of the afternoon he had at last been able to induce her to give up work and

return to her hut, she had only given in for the reason that she had no longer sufficient strength to resist.

On the outskirts of the village he chanced upon the leper Englishman, Stephens. Claude stopped and spoke to him.

"You're looking better already, Stephens," he said. "I thought that gurjun oil would do you good. How are you feeling in yourself?"

"A different man altogether," the other replied. "And I owe it all to you. I'm not going to be fulsome, but I tell you candidly, Mr. Riversdale, when you first came among us I was your enemy. And I can be a bad enemy, too. But you've beaten me by kindness, and now I'm your friend through thick and thin. To prove it, I'm going to give you a bit of advice."

"I'm obliged to you; and what is it?"

The other eyed him closely for a moment without speaking.

"Can't you guess?" he asked. "Don't you see that you're nearly found out by the people down yonder?"

"In what way am I nearly found out? What have I done?"

"Haven't you promised them a doctor from England? A man who is to do what no living being can do, and that is, save them? It was a foolish move on your part—a supremely childish move. If you had thought for a moment, you must have seen that a time would come when, if you had really expected him, he would have to put in an appearance. Then you would have foreseen that his failure to do so would naturally

destroy at one blow all the influence you have been so earnestly striving to build up. Of course, and very naturally too, they think you wanted to bribe them into giving you a hearing. In consequence they allowed you to experiment upon them, believing that it was only preparing the way for the man who was to come later. Now that they find you have been deceiving them, and that he's not coming after all, they're mad with rage. If you could have heard them talking as I have done lately you'd understand."

"But you have made a great mistake, my friend," said Claude sorrowfully. "I was not misleading them. I really meant what I said. A very clever young doctor whom I knew in England, who has made a special study of the disease, sent me a telegram to say that he was really coming."

"You mean it?"

"I do mean it. Here is his telegram; look for yourself. There is no doubt about it. He may be here any day."

"But if he started when he sent this wire he should have been here at least three weeks ago. Even then he would have had ample time to do the journey. Three weeks have gone by, and yet you see there is no sign of him. You cannot wonder at their grumbling, can you? One thing is very certain, however; if he doesn't come before next week is over, there'll be trouble in the settlement, and big trouble too."

This was exactly what Claude thought himself, but he was not going to let the other see it. He only said quietly—

"Then let us hope he will not fail to put in an appearance. Now, good night, and thank you."

Claude was about to continue his walk, but Stephens stopped him again.

"If trouble does come, and I am alive, you may count upon me."

"I honestly believe I can," said Claude solemnly; and then with a renewed expression of his thanks, continued his walk up the hill.

When he reached the plateau he called to Loie, but received no answer. He called again, with the same result. When he had done so three times he began to fear lest something ill had befallen her. With his heart down at zero, he determined to go in and see for himself. Crossing the little plot of ground, he entered the hut for the first time since they had parted there on the night of their arrival.

He found Loie seated on the ground, rocking herself to and fro, and talking in a strangely excited way.

"Loie," he cried, approaching her, "what does this mean? What is the matter with you?"

Loie looked up at him and said gravely—

"My dear, one can never be certain what people will say. The world is so ill-natured, you know, and Victoria Melbenham is a cat at the best of times. I suppose I was foolish, but I did it all for the best. You believe that, don't you?"

"Loie! Loie!" cried Claude, aghast at the condition he found her in. "Don't you know me?"

"Of course I know you," she replied. "You're

Claude; and you always will read stupid books when I want to play with you."

He took her hand. It was hot and dry. She was plainly in a high fever. Stooping down, he picked her up and laid her on her bed, and then set to work to doctor her as well as his knowledge would permit. But it was not destined to be a case that would yield to instant treatment. All that night, and day and night for a week after it, Loie hovered between life and death. Throughout the whole of that time Claude watched by her side almost continually, only absenting himself at intervals that he might hasten down to the village to discover how his patients there were progressing. How he bore the anxiety and strain will never be known. The schooner with Lee on board had not yet arrived, and matters were fast coming to a crisis. Over and over again, as he went about among his people, he was assailed with questions regarding the promised help, and in reply he could only bid them have patience. The burden of his comfort was always the same. The doctor would surely come if they would only wait. But despairing men are hard to hold at the best of times, and renewed promises are but poor food on which to sustain them.

When on the evening of the hundredth and fifteenth day the vessel had not put in an appearance the climax was reached, and he trembled when he thought what might have happened by the end of another day.

That night Loie was, if anything, a little better. Her pulse was certainly stronger, and her temperature

had dropped to slightly above normal. More important still, she was quite conscious.

Claude was sitting by her side telling her of his day's work, when he heard his name called from outside. He sprang up and ran to the door. It was bright moonlight, and standing some few yards from the threshold he could see the little boy, Mallata, mentioned in the preceding chapter. He had evidently come up the hill at his best pace, and was in a great state of fear.

"What is it, Mallata?" asked Claude in the native language, when he realised who it was.

"Tomahawk Nose" (the sobriquet by which Stephens was known in the settlement) "say you go long bush quick. Plenty ki—big one fight—plenty kill down there."

He pointed into the dark behind him, and Claude understood what he meant. The time of trouble had come at last. He made up his mind instantly, and went back into the hut.

"Loie," he said, "do you think you will be all right if I leave you for half an hour alone? I am going down to the village. By some inexplicable means they have got hold of another supply of ki, and as usual they are driving themselves mad with it."

"Go, Claude," said Loie quickly. "Do not fear for me, I shall be quite safe alone. Only be careful of yourself, I implore you."

"Have no fear," he answered. Then, picking up his hat, he left the hut and strode down the hillside. As he went he could hear the noise of the battle in the

village below. When he reached the huts he found the open square turned into a perfect pandemonium. It was a beautiful moonlight night, and every person in the place able to move about seemed to be taking part in the fray. All who were capable of carrying arms had brought them with them, and judging by the screams and groans which were going on, they were undoubtedly using them to the best advantage upon their opponents. Claude heard the reports of four rifles, but fortunately the majority of the weapons used were clubs and tomahawks. He saw that the fighting was undoubtedly serious and called for prompt action.

Pushing his way through the crowd, regardless of the blows aimed at him, he reached the wall, and mounting the stone coping, held up his hand. The result was a bullet within a couple of inches of his right ear. Next moment the riot, which had died down a little on his appearance, recommenced with renewed fury. It was plain that those present were divided into two parties, one of which was led by the Englishman Stephens, the other by a Spanish half-caste, who had never borne Claude any good-will. Claude pushed his way towards the former, and at the top of his voice ordered him to lay down his arms. He might as well have spoken to the wind for all the attention he received. Smarting under their disappointment, the usual apathy of the inhabitants had completely vanished, and now they knew only the thirst for blood.

Regardless of his own safety he rushed hither and

thither, endeavouring to disarm whom he could. But he was only one among so many, and for this reason his efforts were well-nigh useless. The men fought like wild cats, and he soon realised it would be impossible to deal with them until their present excitement had somewhat subsided.

At last the side led by Stephens began to get the upper hand, and in proof of this they presently drove the enemy from the square into the dark bush beyond the houses, leaving their wounded on the field.

Order once restored, Claude looked about him for Stephens, but for some time could not discover him; when he did, he soundly rated him for what he had done, and then asked the reason of it all.

"It's what I told you this morning," gasped the man. "They say you have deceived them, and there was a plot on foot to murder you to-night. I interfered, and then fighting commenced. Take care of yourself, and send your wife out of it at once. I warn you, your lives are in danger. They are liars and dogs, these Spaniards, and no man is safe among them."

'And so you were fighting for me?'

"If you like to put it that way, perhaps we were. But don't talk of what is past; you must think of what is to come. Discover a plan for getting away."

"Impossible!" said Claude. "I shall not go. My friend will arrive in a day or two, and I must be here to receive him. By some means or other he has been delayed upon the road, but I am as certain that he will come eventually as I am that I am talking to you at

this moment. Now I am going to see to the wounded.

By the time the gruesome task of attending to the injuries of the combatants was completed it was broad daylight, and the sun was well above the mountain-top. Claude dismissed his last patient, and then hastened up the hillside to see how Loie was. To his consternation he could not find her. She was not in the hut, or, as far as he could see, anywhere about it.

In an agony of fear he set off in search of her, but for some time was unsuccessful. When he did discover her she was crouching down among the rocks higher up the mountain-side, moaning piteously.

"Save me! Oh, save me!" she cried, in an agony of fear. "They are following me, and they will kill me. Oh, Claude, Claude! why don't you save me?"

Without more ado Claude picked her up in his arms, carried her down to her hut, and placed her on her bed. It seemed to be part of some horrible dream from which he could not waken. What was the matter, and why she had suffered this relapse he could not tell. His burden was heavier than he could bear. Murder and the lust of battle in the village below, and now Loie's life in jeopardy on the hillside. One cry was ever on his lips—

"Oh, if only Lee would come!"

CHAPTER XX

FAREWELL TO LOIRE

To Claude the four-and-twenty hours that succeeded his discovery of Loie among the rocks on the hillside were hours of complete despair. Not for one single instant, save to get her food, did he leave her side. He watched her and waited on her with that absorbing devotion that only love can inspire. In her delirium she referred to bygone days with a memory that betrayed an acuteness of perception that cut him to the quick. He winced and tried not to listen, but in vain. The sun rose above the mountain and found him by her bedside, reached his meridian and sank slowly down to the horizon again, and still he was at his post. On the bed, as darkness fell, Loie tossed and tumbled, moaning at intervals, and always talking, talking, talking.

"Remember, Claude," she said, for the fiftieth time, "when you're a great author we're to be married in Westminster Abbey, and after that we'll live happily for ever and ever. You've promised, you know, and you won't forget, will you?"

Claude took possession of the little thin hand nearest him, and felt as if his heart were breaking.

"I won't forget, Loie," he answered hoping his voice might soothe her.

"Of course you won't," she said, "because if you did I don't know what I should do. You see, I've loved you from the very first—the very, very first. We'll both be grown up some day, and when we are we'll be married. Won't we? And then you shall see how proud I'll be of you."

She was silent for a few moments, and then she continued, as if in explanation—

"You see, I'm going to be a Maid of Honour some day, and stand on the Queen's right hand. You're going to be a great author, Claude, and everybody will buy your books. But it all seems so funny, doesn't it? I'm not myself, you know, at all, but somebody else, and Victoria Melbenham says I've got no heart. They're quite wrong, are they not, Claude? You know better than that?"

The tears were rolling down Claude's cheeks, and for some moments he could not trust himself to speak. When he did find his voice, he said softly—

"Lie down, darling, and try to sleep. You'll soon be better if you will only do that."

With the ready obedience of a little child, she laid her head down, and, holding Claude's hand in hers, presently fell asleep. It was nearly three hours before she let his hand drop, and all that time he never moved lest he might wake her. A night bird was hooting in the tree above the hut, and in the distance he could hear the monotonous roll of the surf on the reef half a mile away. He knelt down beside the bed

and prayed with all his heart and soul to God to spare her life, or if that were impossible, at least to grant her an interval of consciousness before her soul was taken from her, in which he might bid her goodbye.

While he was on his knees he heard his name called as on the previous night.

Treading lightly, in order that he might not disturb Loie, he left the hut. Outside he found a woman, whom he recognised as the wife of one of the Spanish half-castes, a native of the Caroline group.

"What is the matter? What do you want?" he asked, almost under his breath.

"They are fighting again down in the village yonder," she gasped. "And if you don't come to them soon we shall all be killed."

"Again!" he said. "Oh, foolish, foolish people!"

"Come and save them," cried the other. "My husband is fighting, and if you do not come he will be killed."

"It is impossible for me to come," said Claude, with the monotonous utterance of a man upon whom so much sorrow had fallen as to prevent him from taking other than a secondary interest in the doings of the world. "I am wanted here. Sister Loie is dying."

The woman gave a little cry. Loie had often been good to her, and had always seemed too bright and beautiful a creature for mortal ailments to have any effect upon her. It was a difficult matter for her to believe that she was dying.

"Go down, and if possible seek out the Englishman Stephens," said Claude. "Tell him that at any cost

he must withdraw from the fight. Tell him also that I will come down as soon as I possibly can and talk with them."

The woman left him, and he returned to the hut.

To his delight he found Loie awake and in her right mind. He tried to induce her to take some nourishment—he had provided against this contingency—but she would not touch it.

"Claude," she said very softly, "for your sake it seems cruel to say it, but I know that this is the end. I have a feeling that I shall not be alive at sunrise, and while there is time I want to talk to you."

He knelt beside the bed and raised his white, haggard face to hers. It needed but one glance at her face to be convinced as to the truth of what she said.

"What do you wish to say to me, dear?" he asked.

"I want to know what you intend to do when I am gone, Claude."

"For pity's sake don't ask me. I cannot think—I do not know." Then with a passionate outburst that he could not control he cried, "Loie, you shall not go. I could not let you—I could not live without you."

"Ah, darling, I wish I could stay with you," she said, "but you see I can't. Now I want you to think. Will you remain on here, or will you go back to England—and the Great World?"

"Never to England," said Claude firmly. "I could not do that. No, if God will not take me with you, as I hope and pray He may, I shall remain here to carry on the work I have shared with you. Oh, Loie, Loie, my darling, I cannot let you go!"

His head dropped on to the bed, and he burst into a paroxysm of weeping.

Loie stroked his hair and tried to cheer him, but it was a long time before he could speak again. And every moment she was growing weaker. At last she could hardly speak above a whisper. Claude prayed aloud for her, putting all his heart and soul into the words he uttered. When he had done, she said, but so faintly that he could scarcely hear her—

"Darling, I am convinced that God will forgive us our trespasses and that we shall be allowed to be together in heaven. Somehow, I think it won't be very long before you come to me." She was silent for a moment, and then she continued in a whisper, "Oh, Claude, how I have loved you! You were all that made life worth the living."

"You do not regret, then, Loie?"

"Never—not for an instant. You are my lover, as you always have been—my lover and my king."

For nearly five minutes she did not speak again. When she did she whispered—

"Take me in your arms, Claude. Hold me tight." Then, with a little moan, "It is getting so dark, and I am so cold—so very cold."

Claude bent over her, and took her in his arms as she had asked him to do. It was the bitterest moment of all his life. Time seemed to stand still as he waited. Suddenly his ear caught a sound that forced a cry of fear from him. He disengaged his arms and laid her on the pillow, then picking up the lamp from the table hurried with it to the bedside.

One glance told him the truth. The conflict was ended. Loie was dead.

For some minutes he stood regarding her, unable to move, unable to realise even in the faintest degree the loss that had come to him. At last, with a choking sob, he fell upon his knees.

"O God," he prayed, "I am alone. Take me too. O most merciful God, I pray you take me too."

CHAPTER XXI

THE END

Loie was buried at midday in a grave upon the hillside, which Claude had dug for her with his own hands. He worked upon it with a dull, hopeless energy that was unconscious of fatigue. Until it was finished he could think of nothing else, and when he rose from his knees after the last earth had been cast upon the mortal remains of her he had loved better than life itself, he looked like a man who had known the accumulated sorrows of the world. All that made life happy to him had been suddenly taken away, and now he walked like one who feels the hand of Death pressing heavily upon him.

His last prayers said, he stood gazing for a few moments at the grave before him with a heart as near breaking as a man's could be, and then with a suddenness that came upon him almost as a shock, he remembered his duty to the living, and made his way slowly down to the village to inquire into the fighting of the previous night. It was a sad sight he saw before him when he reached the square. On all sides were the bodies of those who had perished in the fray, left just as they had fallen. Several huts were in ruins, and of his beautiful new hospital, in which Loie had done so

much good work, all that remained was a heap of smouldering ashes.

From a child, playing unconcernedly about among the dead, he learned that Stephens had been wounded, and was lying in a hut near that in which dwelt Tomas of Niihan. He walked in that direction, and found the man for whom he was in search stretched out unconscious upon his mat. For some time he was unable to rouse him, but when at last he managed to do so, and he was in a condition to bear questioning, he learnt that the encounter on the previous evening had been commenced by the enemy. In the fray that followed twelve had been killed and twenty-one wounded, four of whom had since been added to the list of the dead. In the middle of his ambulance work he became aware of a commotion outside. A cry was going up that a ship was in sight. Could it be Lee at last? Springing to his feet, he ran to the door to look. One glance, however, at the stranger, as she entered the lagoon, was sufficient to disabuse him of this notion. The new arrival was a Spanish man-of-war—one of the vessels whose duty it was to visit the island once every six months. He heaved a little sigh of disappointment, and went back to the little crowd of patients, whose wounds he was dressing.

It struck him that to go on board and report the rioting that had occurred would be the correct course to pursue, but the mishaps of the unfortunate combatants called for attention first. For this reason the vessel had been at anchor the greater part of an hour before he was at liberty to go on board. He left the

hut, where he had been working, with that intention, but just as he turned seawards he saw approaching him from the beach a young officer and a dozen or so of marines, all armed to the teeth.

On seeing Claude, the former gave an order, and when his men had halted, approached him, saying in Spanish—

"You are my prisoner, Señor. I have been sent ashore to arrest you. I must ask you to accompany me on board."

For a moment Claude was too astonished to say anything. But he soon recovered himself, and in a tone of weariness stated his willingness to comply with the other's demand. Once on board he was arraigned before the commanding officer, a fiery little potentate, dressed in a brilliant uniform and seated under an awning on the quarter-deck. There he was accused of having by false pretences and a long career of deception incited the unfortunate people of the island to rise in rebellion against the crown of Spain; as a result there had been severe fighting and a number of law-abiding civilians had lost their lives. Claude listened with great astonishment, and it was not until he heard the complete list of accusations brought against him, including that of forcing the inhabitants into embracing the faith he held, that he realised how busily his enemies in the township had been at work against him since the vessel's arrival. But he was too weary of the struggle to protest. Had Loie been alive it would have been a different matter; now that she was gone, all that made life worth the living had vanished with her.



"What answer have you to give to the charges preferred against you?"



"What answer have you to give to the charges preferred against you?" asked the captain.

"Only that they are false in every particular," replied Claude. "I have not endeavoured to make any one single man forsake his faith. I have incited no one to rebellion, nor have I, to the best of my knowledge, deceived any one."

"Then what were the services you held in the church you built in the village yonder? How did the natives who took your part become possessed of English rifles? And where is the doctor whom you promised was to save them?"

"To your first question I can only answer that my services were strictly undenominational. I cannot tell you how the men became possessed of the rifles. I did not give them to them, and as to your last, my friend has not arrived yet, but he will certainly come. I have his promise contained in his telegram."

"Show it to me."

Claude produced the paper, and handed it to his questioner.

The captain glanced at it, and seeing that it was written in English said insolently—

"I don't believe it. This has been prepared for the occasion. Any fool could see that it's a forgery."

He tore the telegram into shreds and threw it away.

"There is the fact of the importation of the rifles, and there are fifty deaths of his Majesty's law-abiding subjects for you and the leper Englishman to account for between you. Do so."

"As to the first, I have told you that I am innocent.

As to the second, I can only say how deeply I deplore what has happened, but——"

"But you would do the same again directly my back was turned. Madre de Dios, but you are an insolent dog, like all your countrymen, and you shall be taught a lesson. Where did you get those rifles?"

"I know nothing of them."

"You lie—and you know that you lie."

Even then Claude showed no sign of anger.

"I am not lying," he said quietly but firmly.

"You dare to contradict me?"

"I simply tell you what is the truth."

"It is not the truth. I have the sworn evidence of three Spaniards that you sold them the guns. Answer me now! Don't you know I can have you shot for the least of the things you have done yonder?"

"I know that it lies in your power to kill me, but even then I cannot tell you what is not the truth."

"You dare to give me the lie direct? Refuse me once more the information I ask, and I'll not offer you another chance. Where did you obtain the arms you sold to these men?"

Claude looked at the dark and angry face before him and answered simply—

"I did not sell the rifles."

"Madre de Dios, if you can be contumacious after I have warned you, then you die at daybreak."

Turning to an officer near him he cried—

"Take him away. Imprison him in his hut, and shoot him at daybreak."

"May I ask for what crime I am condemned to die?" asked Claude.

"For selling arms to the natives—for rebellion—for insolence. Will you tell me now?"

"I regret that I cannot tell you what is not true, even to save my life."

The captain waved his hand, and next moment Claude was hurried to the gangway by a party of marines and placed in the same boat which had conveyed him to the warship. On reaching the shore he was marched to his own hut, and made a prisoner there. Sentries with fixed bayonets were placed on every side, and when it had been ascertained that it was impossible for him to escape, he was left to himself to think over the fate that awaited him on the morrow.

He had not tasted food since the previous day, but that fact hardly troubled him. His senses were still so numbed by the shock of Loie's death that he was incapable of appreciating such minor bodily inconveniences. He was thinking of her prophecy, and realising that the end had come very soon, as she had predicted. One thing was very certain, and he thanked God for it: by the same time on the following day his troubles would be over for good and all. He felt no sorrow; no regret; only a little curiosity as to the reason which had prevented Lee from coming, and a small amount of wonderment as to what would be the fate of the settlement when he had been taken from it.

At sundown a meal was brought to him, and during

the evening a messenger arrived to inquire if he had any answer to give the commander of the warship.

"Only one. Tell him that I am innocent of the charge he brings against me," said Claude.

"You will not give him the information he seeks?"

"I cannot furnish him with what I do not know myself."

The officer withdrew, and for the rest of the night Claude was left in peace. He laid himself down upon his bed and tried to sleep. Possibly his mind was a little unstrung by Loie's death, and by the other extreme excitements of the day; at any rate a little before midnight he developed the notion that Loie was with him again. She seemed to be standing by his bedside, looking down at him, with a loving smile upon her face, telling him not to fear, that God had forgiven him, and that when the end came he would be with her never to be separated more. When she faded away from his sight Marcia came and stood beside him. There was a new expression on her face, and he saw that she had at last forgiven him.

After she, too, had left him he fell asleep and dreamt that he was a boy once more, playing with Loie on the beach at Apia. He was just about to promise her that some day, as soon as he was a famous man, he would marry her, when he was awakened by some one shaking his shoulder. It was the young officer of marines who had arrested him on the previous day.

"It is time, Señor, for you to get up," he said, when Claude opened his eyes.

The other rose immediately.

"Is it certain, then, that I am to die?" he asked, with a little expression of anxiety upon his face.

"I regret to say that my orders have not been countermanded," replied the other.

"You need not regret it, my friend," said Claude. "It is the best news you could give me. I am quite prepared."

The officer looked at his prisoner and saw that he showed no sign of fear. He was a courageous young fellow himself, and could appreciate bravery in others.

"If you would like any time alone first, or if there is any other way in which I can be of service to you, I shall be glad to do it."

"I am obliged to you," said Claude. "There is nothing you can do for me. Stay—there is one thing. Have you received any instructions as to where the execution is to take place?"

"None whatever."

"Then if you will allow me to choose the spot I shall be very grateful."

"There can be no possible harm in that," answered the man. "At any rate, if there is I'll risk it. Where is the place?"

"Shall I conduct you to it?"

The officer bowed and Claude left the hut, accompanied by a guard, and led them across the plateau to the little open space where Loie was buried. Then, turning to the young man who had shown him this indulgence, he said, pointing to the grave—

"The woman I loved lies here. She died yesterday.

If you will bury me beside her you will do me the greatest kindness I could ask you."

"It shall be done," said the officer. "I only wish it were possible for me to spare you."

"That would be no service to me. I have done with life. Now carry out your work."

"Not yet. There is another to die with you."

"Another? And who is he?"

"An Englishman—a leper. He was one of the leaders of the fighting yesterday. On being taken aboard ship he insulted our commander most grossly. See, here he comes."

Claude turned, and saw another party of marines leading Stephens up the hill. When they reached the plateau the latter caught sight of Claude and greeted him.

"So we are to die together," he said in English. "Well, next to killing me it's the best thing they have done for me. It's a shame that you should suffer; you are innocent, and I told the commander so pretty plainly yesterday. However, as there's no other way out of it let us show them that we can die like English gentlemen."

"We are quite ready," said Claude, turning towards the soldiers, who had fallen back a few paces. He then took his place with Stephens beside Loie's grave and waited.

The officer wished to bind their eyes, but they would not hear of it.

"I held her Majesty's commission once," said Stephens, proudly, "and no Spaniard shall think I'm afraid. Will you shake hands with me?"

Claude held out his hand, and his companion took it.

"You can see now that the warning I gave you when you first arrived was a good one. You have given her life and your own for those cowardly curs watching us from over yonder, and what good have you accomplished? None whatever! But you are a man, every inch of you, and if there is a God He'll reward you."

"It was my work," said Claude. "You remember the text, 'Work while ye have light, for the night cometh wherein no man shall work.'"

"This is our night, then."

"No, not our night. This is the dawning of our glorious day."

"Señors," cried the officer in command, "time is up."

"Then goodbye!" said Stephens.

"Goodbye!" answered Claude, and as he spoke he looked at the sun shining on the blue sea, and the white gulls circling above their heads. Then a curious revelation came to him. He realised that the scene he was now looking upon was exactly that he had had revealed to him in the dream that had frightened him so much the night before he married Marcia. Instantly he dropped the handkerchief he held in his hand.

The rifles rang out, and Claude and Stephens fell together across Loie's grave, each shot through the heart.

On the last morning of that gruesome week, a little before midday, a schooner put into the lagoon. She

had on board her a man who had been shipwrecked on an island, scarcely a hundred miles distant from the settlement, and whom a boat's crew had found and rescued when going ashore for water. He said his name was Vincent Lee, and that he was on his way from England, to help an old friend who had given up his life to the service of the lepers of Vaamoa, when his vessel was wrecked. He went on shore, but returned in something under an hour to the vessel which had brought him, his eyes swollen with tears.

He is back in London now, and a famous man; but though he is communicative enough on most subjects, there is one thing about which he cannot be induced to speak, and that is the greatest event of his life—his voyage to the Southern Seas. That he likes to remember it himself is proved by a glass case that decorates the wall above his consulting-room chimney-piece. It contains a little withered palm-leaf that once fluttered above three lonely graves in the North-Western Pacific.

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